"Howard's writing seems so highly charged with energy that it nearly gives off sparks."
–STEPHEN KING

ROBERT E. HOWARD

CREATOR OF CONAN®

KULL

EXILE OF ATLANTIS

HEROIC TALES OF ADVENTURE FROM THE FATHER OF SWORD AND SORCERY

FULLY ILLUSTRATED BY JUSTIN SWEET

KULL

EXILE *of* ATLANTIS

ROBERT E. HOWARD

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I’d like to dedicate my work in this book to my wife, Julie.

Justin Sweet

Untitled Story
first published in *King Kull,* Lancer Books, 1967 (as “Exile of Atlantis”)

The Shadow Kingdom
first published in *Weird Tales,* August 1929

The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune
first published in *Weird Tales,* September 1929

Untitled Draft
original version first published in *Kull,* Bantam Books, 1978

The Cat and the Skull
first published in *King Kull,* Lancer Books, 1967 (as “Delcardes’ Cat”)

The Skull of Silence
first published in *King Kull,* Lancer Books, 1967

The Striking of the Gong
original version first published in *The Second Book of Robert E. Howard,* Zebra Books, 1976

The Altar and the Scorpion
first published in *King Kull,* Lancer Books, 1967

The Curse of the Golden Skull
first published in *The Howard Collector,* Spring 196*7*

The Black City
original version first published in *Kull,* Bantam Books, 1978

Untitled Fragment
original version first published in *Kull,* Bantam Books, 1978

By This Axe I Rule!
first published in *King Kull,* Lancer Books, 1967

Swords of the Purple Kingdom
first published in *King Kull*, Lancer Books, 1967

The King and the Oak
first published in *Weird Tales*, February 1939

Kings of the Night
first published in *Weird Tales*, November 1930

Summer Morn appears here for the first time

Am-ra the Ta-an
first published in *A Rhyme of Salem Town and Other Poems*,
Robert E. Howard Properties LLC, 2002

The Tale of Am-ra
first published in *The New Howard Reader 2*, August 1998

Untitled and Unfinished Fragment appears here for the first time

Untitled and Incomplete Fragment appears here for the first time

The Shadow Kingdom (draft) appears here for the first time

Delcardes' Cat (draft) appears here for the first time

The King and the Oak (draft)
first published in *The New Howard Reader 1*, June 1998

Plates

Kull - Exile of Atlantis Frontispiece
“Kull! Ha, accursed usurper from the pagan isles”
“They be all serpent men!”
There comes, even to kings, the time of great weariness.
“I am Kull, of Valusia”
Delcardes’ cat
…a test of might and endurance.
Kull sat at ease on the throne of society.
She did not hear the light footfalls.
He made a terrible and primordial picture.
They flooded the stair like a black wave of death.

Foreword

This has been a long trip filled with great moments and great struggle. It's been five years since I was first asked to work on a volume of the Robert E. Howard library of classics. I sit here now, nearly finished with it all, thinking how fortunate I've been to get this assignment. I fulfilled a dream I had when starting out, back in my first illustration class in college, where I told my instructor that I wanted to illustrate books "like N. C. Wyeth."

Well, I've done it. Not like Wyeth, to be sure, but like me. Not only having the chance to illustrate a book, but being given a series of stories by a great author, Robert E. Howard, with one of his greatest creations, Kull of Atlantis.

It's tough to end this, to finally let it stand as my take. To let go of everything else it could have been–and God knows, if it wasn't for publisher, family, and debt, I'd continue trying to get it right. "Right" being some impossible marriage that would fit what Howard had in mind and fully convey what I dreamed could be.

So as I let go now, I hope that I've served Howard well, and that, if he could look upon these images, he would forgive the inaccuracies and be pleased with the spirit that I've put into Kull and his world.

Justin Sweet
2006

Introduction

Is it not passing brave to be a king,
And ride in triumph through Persepolis?
—Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine, Part One*

Kull of high Atlantis. Kull, who will never be "of" Valusia no matter how long he rules the Land of Enchantment. Kull, cold-eyed but hot-headed, a bull in an unimaginably ancient china shop. Kull, the thinking man's barbarian and the barbarian as thinking man, for whom the surfaces of forbidden lakes and sorcerous mirrors are not barriers but invitations. Kull, who opens Pandora's boxes like birthday gifts. Kull, who returns the stare of Deep Time and dares the stair that leads up to perspectives high, chilly, and cosmic. The king who philosophizes with a broadsword and legislates with a battle-axe, the king who haunts us because he is himself so haunted. Kull, who is no mere way-station en route to Conan, but an unforgettable destination in his own right.

Like their hero, who is quotable whether expressing ominous amusement–to the lake-dwellers of *The Cat and the Skull*, as they close in with daggers: "This is a game I understand, ghosts"–or an elegiac impulse, as to the wizard Tuzun Thune: "Yet is it not a pity that the beauty and glory of men should fade like smoke on the summer sea?"–the Kull stories can speak for themselves. But some readers might enjoy the Atlantean usurper even more if we spend a few pages situating him both within the grand overarching continuum that resulted from Robert E. Howard's talent for rewriting and pre-writing history and within the Texas fictioneer's abbreviated but altogether astonishing career.

It is not quite accurate to label *The Shadow Kingdom*, which introduced Weird Tales readers to King Kull in the August 1929 issue (the untitled vignette many of us first met as *Exile of Atlantis*, with its glimpse of the Kull who would be king, was not published until 1967), the original sword-and-sorcery story. To do so is to overlook an earlier masterpiece, Lord Dunsany's 1910 *The Fortress Unvanquishable, Save for Sacnoth*, in which a swordsman invades the hellish, dragon-guarded stronghold of an archmage. But the

Howard tale jumps out at us as not only the first American sword-and-sorcery story but the first to summon a series into being by offering a setting, an arena, greater than was required for just a single adventure, a setting the depth and detail of which all but demanded sequels. With Kull's Pre-Cataclysmic Age there arrived an American fantasyland defined by danger and doubt rather than the bumptious Midwestern boosterism of Oz or the sword-and-planet self-infatuation of John Carter of Mars, the extent of whose ego at times suggests that Helium, the Barsoomian city-state he rises to rule, is exceedingly well-named.

The barbarians of the late Pre-Cataclysmic Age are offshore islanders who prey on the Thurian mainland from Atlantis, Lemuria, and the Pictish Isles as if from unsinkable pirate ships. The times call for blood and iron, but Thurian blood has thinned and their iron has corroded; where the dominant civilization of the Hyborian Age will be "so virile that contact with it virtually snatched out of the wallow of savagery such tribes as it touched," the Seven Empires of the Pre-Cataclysmic dodder and totter. This is a world less mapped than Conan's and more lapped by mystery and mysticism at its edges: ice caves in the far north, reptile-reeking jungles in the far south; to the west, the isles beyond the sunset, to the east, the River Stagus and World's End. We learn that Verulian trickery is a byword, and that Thurania is the foe of Farsun, but what Howard is really telling in the Kull stories is Time. Untold centuries, millennia, and aeons of the stuff are told, and told tellingly, as we sense history shading back into prehistory, kings dimming into chiefs, palaces into caves, nations into tribes, laws into taboos. The whole point to Thurian civilization is its stupefying continuity and longevity; at the very dawn of Pictish or Atlantean awareness, dusk had already draped the Seven Empires. Their relative opacity or obscurity, the fact that they are not readily identifiable as stand-ins or surrogate-states as are Stygia for Egypt, Zingara for Spain, and Turan for the Ottoman Empire in the Conan series, draws us deeper into dreamland.

Kull's project of rejuvenating Valusia is not so much foredoomed as after-doomed by *The Hyborian Age*, an essay that Howard did not write until 1932, and it is important to keep in mind that the Pre-Cataclysmic Age is unaware of being the Pre-Cataclysmic Age, is unaware that the Cataclysm is poised overhead throughout the series, a Sword of Damocles forged from water and wind, lava, and tremors. Or is it? Signs and portents like the death by drowning of the "outlaw tribe" of Tiger Valley recalled by the Atlantean characters or the casual reference to "the Flood" in *Swords of the Purple Kingdom* are present. The lake-king has it almost right when he sees in Kull "the first wave of the rising tide of savagery which shall overwhelm the

world," and Kull himself asserts "Someday the sea will flow over these hills–" as early as *Exile*, long before Tuzun Thune's mirror reflects a future in which "the restless green waves roar for many a fathom above the eternal hills of Atlantis" and "strange savages roam the elder lands." Howard was well aware that a writer who avails himself of the name "Atlantis" gives away his ending, which is why he traveled back ages and ages in advance of that ending, the symbol of imperial overreach and the human jostling of the divine since Plato, to a joltingly flint-tipped and cave-sheltering beginning. And, yes, the Atlantis of the Kull series is fiendishly difficult to reconcile with that of Howard's novellas *Skull-Face* and *The Moon of Skulls*, so perhaps we should mutter something about the hobgoblin of little minds and leave off trying.

At the start of his Conan years Howard looked upon his Kull years not as a false start but a foundation; he built *The Phoenix on the Sword* from *By This Axe I Rule!* (unsold and therefore for practical purposes untold) and built the Pre-Cataclysmic Age into the back-story of *The Hyborian Age* and the eyewitness account of Yag-kosha, the long-lived, far-sighted being of *The Tower of the Elephant*. When Howard wrote of the Thurians in 1932 that "Picts, Atlanteans, and Lemurians were their generals, their statesmen, often their kings," he had long since created in Kelkor just such a general, in Ka-nu just such a statesman, and in Kull just such a king. That same opening to *The Hyborian Age* adds to our knowledge by citing "the wars between Valusia and Commoria" (a realm nowhere mentioned in the actual Kull stories) as an implicit prelude to "the conquests by which the Atlanteans founded a kingdom on the mainland." And as Yag-kosha tells it, the Post-Cataclysmic Age was marked by an intensification of the "wild wars and world-ancient feuds" of the earlier period. The remnants of the Pictish and Atlanteans would "go down to ruin, locked in bloody wars. We saw the Picts sink into abysmal savagery, the Atlanteans into apedom again…Wesaw [Conan's] people rise under a new name from the jungles of the apes that had been Atlanteans." Kull, who readily admits to a early childhood as a "hairless ape roaming in the woods," one that "could not speak the language of men," turns out to have been a sort of preview of coming subtractions for the Atlanteans after the Cataclysm.

The Kull stories wander far afield in time, but spatially seldom stray from Valusia–which is why Howard's tantalizing *River Stagus/Beyond the Sunrise* fragment, with its hot pursuit traversing whole kingdoms otherwise unexplored in the series, is so welcome. The continuity of circumstance that distinguishes Kull from Conan makes possible a recurring cast, a Howardian repertory company the members of which include Ka-nu, an avuncular ambassador not just from Pictland but from the mellowing and maturation

that Kull cannot imagine undergoing himself. Ka-nu's barb in *The Cat and the Skull*–"Naturally, I went first to the torture chamber, since Tu was in charge–" tells us most of what we need to know about Tu, who despite his second person familiar pronoun of a name has little tolerance for informality and upholds tradition all the more blindly and bureaucratically for having been born a plebian. The chief councilor, who will brook no challenge to the State's law, is anticipated by Gor-na in *Exile of Atlantis*, who will brook no challenge to the tribe's lore. When Gor-na scolds Kull for skepticism, he voices the outlook that the outcast-to-be will struggle against throughout the series: "What always was, must always be."

We are accustomed to Howard's Picts as the destroyers of a civilization at the end of the Hyborian Age and the defiers of a civilization in the age of the Caesars, but in the Kull stories we must adjust to Picts as defenders of the decrepit civilization to which they are allied. Those defenders are led by Brule the Spear-slayer, a study, years before Conan, of the *Beyond the Black River* dictum that "a wolf [is] no less a wolf" because he chooses or chances "to run with the watch-dogs." The power not behind but beside Kull's throne, he often functions as a reality principle in the series: "Ever the Pict's fierce secret whisper brought [Kull] back from the realm of unreality in which he moved." In their 1987 overview of Howard's work, Marc A. Cerasini and Charles Hoffman illuminated the Kull stories with the perfect line from William Blake: "The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction," yet for all the wisdom he gains, Kull, the tiger of wrath, must be saved again and again by Brule, the horseman of instruction: When it is necessary to ride to Kull's rescue, or ride across the continent in the service of Kull's revenge, the Picts saddle up, and although the great days when Howard would annex Texas for heroic fantasy are yet to come, the "lean, powerful savages, men of Brule's tribe, who [sit] their horses like centaurs" suggest the Comanches-turned-cavalry.

It would never occur to Brule that the pen is mightier than the sword, which is why he urges Kull to arrange for the seditious poet Ridondo to "make rhymes for the vultures." *By This Axe I Rule!* is the only story in which Ridondo appears, although his songs live on after him in S*words of the Purple Kingdom*. He permits Howard, whose poetry filled many pages but paid few bills, to have fun with a fellow blue-eyed versifier. When we meet Ridondo, he is clad in jester's motley but brandishes a dagger and exults in the assassination he has sworn to achieve. Meanwhile Kull, the peerless warrior, is first seen behind "a small writing desk," and the seeming role reversal continues as king strives to spare poet while poet strives to slay king. Kull is not a Celtic character, except retroactively, in that Howard decided years later

that the Atlanteans had been the progenitors of the Cimmerians, who were the forefathers of the Celts. But the barbarian's reverence for the bard, even one as cracked and citified as Ridondo, earns him honorary Celt status–and also a near-fatal wound when the poet pens him "a deathly song" in his unprotected side. In effect one chink in Kull's armor has found another, and it is interesting to note this observation by his creator in a 1928 letter: "Each time a man opens his heart he breaks his armor and weakens his battle might."

During the Kull years Howard the apprentice took over from Howard the amateur. He was less market-minded than he would become, and the series exhibits not the precision-guided productivity of the later professional but a purple and gold romanticism that is not uncommon in a writer barely into his twenties. Much less common are the distinctively Howardian black borders and gray backgrounds of all that purple and gold. Dreamy but not drowsy, melancholy but not morose, these stories are the work of a young man who never became very old at all. Like Kull, that young man was both fascinated and appalled by extremities of age and reveries of remembrance, while also being constantly goaded by "the vagaries of a people which could never understand him."

Howard himself may have given us tacit permission to perceive Kull as his attitudinal doppelgänger in an October 1928 letter to his friend Harold Preece: "An occultist of my acquaintance, who has gone deeper in the matter than any man I ever knew, says I have a very ancient soul, am a reincarnated Atlantean, in fact!" With Kull, the feral child is father to the man; he knows not "who his own parents were," an ignorance that perhaps at times seemed like bliss to Howard as he coped with the squalls and squabbles of life in a small family in a small town. Kull's ostensibly absolute power is often merely powerlessness prettified by pageantry, and the entire series clanks with chains, literalizations of the fetters the only son of Isaac and Hester Howard felt chafing him, from the "heavy wooden chain, a peculiar thing which was particularly Atlantean in its manufacture," in which the Ala of the *Exile* story awaits burning at the stake, to the "chains of friendship, tribe, and tradition" broken in *The Shadow Kingdom*. The phantasmal Eallal proceeds with "slow, silent footsteps, as if the chains of all the ages were upon those vague feet," and as Kull unleashes his inner berserker on the serpent-men Howard tells us "But now some chain had broken in his soul." One of the fragments espouses an equality of the remarkable "beyond the shackles of birth and circumstance," and Kull breaks the news to the second Ala that "the king is only a slave like yourself, locked with heavier chains."

A tiger in chains would be a crime, a contravention of the natural order to which only decadent Valusians (or the Romans of *Kings of the Night*) might

stoop. Where the lion is the king of beasts, and also the preferred beast of kings, the tiger's aura is more Eastern and exotic–one of the ways Howard establishes that we are vastly displaced in time is to have tigers roaring "across the starlight" on the beaches of Atlantis. And the tiger hunts in splendid isolation; he is a predator without a pride, a fitting totem for Kull (and perhaps his creator). "I–thought you were a human tiger," the Ala of *By This Axe!* confesses, shortly before Kull is forced to demonstrate many of his most tigerish qualities, but the linkage begins before we even leave Atlantis, with the hunters' debate as to whether a king tiger once scaled a vine to the moon to escape hunters and dwelt there "for many years."

Another 1928 Howard letter to another friend, Tevis Clyde Smith, contains references to demi-gods attaining pinnacles, "the deeds of unthoughted heroes," the "crude, groping handiwork" of authorial beginners and writers "struggling up the long ladder." The latter two images are suggestive of one of the staggering vistas of *The Shadow Kingdom*, in which Man is "the jest of the gods, the blind, wisdomless striver from dust to dust, following the long bloody trail of his destiny, knowing not why, bestial, blundering, like a great murderous child, yet feeling somewhere a spark of divine fire." Howard went on in the same letter to claim that he was familiar with "the emptiness of success" despite not having succeeded yet: "For always through the cheers of the mob will come, like a writhing serpent, the memory of the jeers of the mob when I walked and sweated pure red blood." This reads like a rough draft of the early scenes in *The Shadow Kingdom*, and not just because of Howard's tendency to assign fangs, coils, and scales to anything negative; the mingled cheers and jeers are also noteworthy. Behind the Atlantean usurper who can command obedience but never legitimacy, we can discern the aspiring author too often rejected and too quickly dejected. But the spark of divine fire would continue to motivate Howard to sweat pure red blood; when he confided to Tevis Clyde Smith in November of 1928 that "I've got the makings of a great writer in me, but I'll never become one because I'm too erratic and lazy to really try and keep on trying," he sold himself short.

The makings of that great writer are on display here, but the Kull stories differ from Howard's Thirties output in part because of "a certain archaic tang"–aye, nay, ye, mayhap–which he himself attributed to "much medieval reading." The Faerie fringes of the series border on what is unhelpfully called high fantasy, nor should we overlook mordant flickers that we might sooner expect from a James Branch Cabell or Clark Ashton Smith: Brule's ancestry includes "a legendary hero or two, semi-deified for feats of personal strength or wholesale murder," while Ascalante has noticed that "Poets always hate

those in power and turn to dead ages for relief in dreams." Howard's nomenclature is not yet the thing of cheerfully borrowed beauty it will become, although "Valusia," with its hints of "allusion" and "illusion," is perfect for a kingdom that is the Thurian Continent's many-magicked Heart of Elderness, and Goron bora Ballin and Ronaro Atl Volante are convincingly aristocratic appellations.

If it can seem as if the principal business of the late Pre-Cataclysmic Age is preventing or punishing mixed marriages, Howard, who dreamed so much, certainly never dreamed that all of his Kull outtakes would be published and pored over. Willful but wile-dependent, the women who plague Kull with their nuptial agendas are like unto little sisters, the creations of a bookish young man more comfortable grappling with the riddles of existence than with girls. The time for Valeria of the Red Brotherhood and Agnes de la Fere is not yet; although the second Ala shows promise, and more than just a single consonant separates the Delcartes of *Swords of the Purple Kingdom* from the Delcardes of *The Cat and the Skull*. In a crisis Howard even allows Delcartes to pounce "as quickly and silently as a tigress."

Delcardes and Delcartes have something of the flapper about them, and that is only appropriate, for the Kull series is a product not just of Howard's twenties but "the Twenties," a decade that roared louder than all the tigers of Atlantis. The writing of these stories coincided with the exact moment, post-colonial but pre-imperial, in which American literature came into its own and became aware of itself, of the power of what had already been written and the promise of what soon would be. At the risk of a fanciful comparison, the Atlantean usurper in his palace is as much an expression of this cultural quickening or kindling as is Jay Gatsby in his mansion. Furthermore, to say that *The Shadow Kingdom* is the first American sword-and-sorcery story is to mean much more than simply the first such story authored by an American. American concerns populate and animate much of the series.

Conan will come down from the North, but Kull comes from the West, out of the sea, from a newer world, an island continent the mountains of which are upstart and out-thrust, "brutal and terrible with youth, even as Kull." An outcast but also an outrider, the Atlantean's behavior often resembles that of an adolescent among the aged–or an American among Europeans, as Howard pits "a straightforward man of the seas and the mountain" against "a race strangely and terribly wise with the mysticisms of antiquity." The "palaces and the temples and the shrines" of the City of Wonders speak to the new king as the Forum, the Parthenon, the Latin Quarter, and Westminster Abbey have spoken of unmatchable antiquity and atmospherics to so many sensitive Americans. While Kull's curriculum vitae, which includes stints as a pirate,

an outlaw, a gladiator, and a mercenary, is not exactly that of an ingénue or innocent abroad, or even an Atlantean Yankee in what had been King Borna's Court, it is worth noting that Mark Twain's impatient, innovative Hank Morgan when first met seems "to move among the spectres and shadows and dust and mold of a gray antiquity." The people of Camelot deem Morgan to be visiting "from a far land of barbarians." So after a Great War that outdid even Twain in indicting hereditary monarchy, after America had recently crossed an ocean to intervene in a quarrel between at least six empires, how could the New World and the Old do anything but collide in the heroic fantasy of a young and alert American? The old world reels down the road to ruin and forgetfulness. That's the lake-king of *The Cat and the Skull*, he who also deduces that "the rot of civilization has not yet entered [Kull's] soul." In the Atlantean's Valusian experiences as in the mythology of so many transatlantic encounters, instinct confronts intrigue, energy, ennui, and pragmatism, precedent.

In 1930 Howard looked back at 1914 in his piece *A Touch of Trivia*, recalling that he had "firmly [thrown] in my lot with the Allies and thereafter remained loyal," and stressing "We all felt then a friendship for France." The City of Wonders is not necessarily the City of Lights, and the foreign soldiery, "men of Mu and of Kaa-u and of the hills of the east and the isles of the west," saviors of Valusia who walk with "shoulders flung back" and inspect Kull "boldly and straightly" even as he inspects them, need not be seen as the American Expeditionary Force parading down the Champs d'Elysée. But with so many of even the verifiably human Valusians speaking with forked tongues, could there be a trace of what befell Woodrow Wilson at the Paris Peace Conference in Kull beset by courtiers and conspirators? Had he lived and somehow been exposed to *The Shadow Kingdom*, Wilson, one of the preachiest presidents, might have nodded feelingly at Brule's description of "the statecraft of the Seven Empires" as "a mazy, monstrous thing" or recognized the European diplomacy that hoodwinked and hamstrung him in Howard's "masquerade where men and women hid their real thoughts with a smooth mask." Is it a fetch too far to speculate that Howard might have been doing what gifted fantasists have been known to do, alluding without allegorizing? If so, if, once upon a time, these stories were entwined with that same time, they have emphatically not been entombed along with their period of origin.

But all such thoughts are at best marginalia scrawled in invisible ink, ghosts even more spectral than the many others thronging this series. "Shadow" and "shade" are sometime synonyms for "ghost," and the rampant ghostliness of *The Shadow Kingdom* is made explicit by the title of its alter

ego in Howard's semi-autobiographical novel *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs*: "The Phantom Empire." Whether "Kingdom" or "Empire," the tale can be approached as a ghost story in which a world of ghosts is disrupted, intruded upon, haunted, by the occasional living man. In a brilliant touch, the specter of the murdered monarch Eallal fails even to notice Kull and Brule, as if they are the ghosts: "The phantom came straight on, giving them no heed; Kull shrank back as it passed them, feeling an icy breath like a breeze from the arctic snow." Visions invade Kull's mind "like ghosts flying unbidden from the whispering void of nonexistence," and the tablet in *By This Axe I Rule!* is another kind of ghost, albeit stone and ultimately shatterable, that of "the primal law makers" haunting and thwarting the lovers Ala and Seno val Dor.

To live is sooner or later to outlive oneself, to be a ghost. Kull the king has outlived the earlier self who harried the Pictish Isles and "laughed upon the green roaring tides of the Atlantean sea," and in *Kings of the Night* he briefly outlives his entire era, prompting the Norseman Wulfhere's question "Shall a ghost lead living men?" Once returned to his own time, Kull discloses that he has just "fought for the king of a strange shadow-people" and is left with even more divided loyalties when it comes to the real and the unreal: "All life and time and space seemed like a dream of ghosts to him, and he wondered thereat all the rest of his life." A substantial amount of insubstantiality is characteristic of Howard's fantasy–substantial, and substantiating; the gritty and the ghostly reinforce each other in his pages. Just as Kull's confusion about his own identity and authenticity serve to shore up his identity and authenticity as one of the most unforgettable figures in heroic fantasy, his creator's insistence upon unreality and impermanence helps to solidify the reality and permanence of his achievement as a storyteller.

Another instance of phantasmal imagery in *The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune* merits our attention: "I can summon up a demon more savage than any in ghostland–by smiting you in the face." Howard was most likely inspired by one of the most famous of Shakespearean exchanges, from Act III of *Henry IV, Part One*, a play he knew well:

Glendower: I can call spirits from the vasty deep.

Hotspur: Why so can I, or so can any man;
But will they come when you do call for them?

But it is a different play that haunts–if the reader will tolerate the overuse of that verb a final time–the Kull stories. Himself the scion of a family steeped in Shakespeare, the eminent fantasist Fritz Leiber was the first to point out that Kull is a Macbeth figure. The Scottish usurper is to Duncan as Kull is to

Borna, and Macbeth's insight once he has done murder to don majesty in Act III, Scene 1–"To be thus is nothing./But to be safely thus–" is even more valid for Kull, who has rather more than just the words of some weird sisters to worry about. Howard establishes a Macbethian mood for the series with the first two sentences of the *Exile* story, in which the sun sets and "a last crimson glory" appears atop the snowy peaks "like a crown of blood." Where life for Macbeth is "but a walking shadow; a poor player/That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,/And then is heard no more," Kull perceives Valusia as "a kingdom of the shadows, ruled by phantoms who glided back and forth behind the painted curtains, mocking the futile king who sat upon the throne–himself a shadow." Another presence in the stories is a fellow American as well as a fellow poet: Poe contributes epigraphs for *The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune* and *Kings of the Night*, and the passivity of his *Silence: A Fable* may have provoked the hyperkineticism of *The Screaming Skull of Silence*. Howard was a superb writer in part because he was a superb reader; he stole from the best and then transcended the thefts by transmuting the swag.

Kull's first words in his first Weird Tales appearance are "The army is like a sword, and must not be allowed to rust," but Valusia's military might risk doing so in the ensuing stories, with the exception of the Picts and Red Slayers who accompany the king beyond the sunrise. We hear that Kull's reign got off to a martial start as he broke the back of a Triple Federation and smashed the marauding Grondarians, but we don't get to watch. When he declares "My right hand is stronger to defend than all Grondar is to assail!" the Grondarians display an ability to learn from experience but disappoint us by backing down. It is essential that writers of epic and/or heroic fantasy develop some of the skills of war correspondents and military historians, and fortunately Howard's breakthrough would come with the last story in this volume, *Kings of the Night*, which finally turns Kull loose on a battlefield, albeit in a fight and an age not his own. In a March 1930 letter to Tevis Clyde Smith, the Texan confided "[*Kings*] was rather a new line for me, as I described a pitched battle. However, I think I handled it fairly well." He was still pleased in September of 1930: "Some ways this story is the best I ever wrote. Nothing very weird about it, but good battle-stuff, if I do say so myself." So *Kings* is noteworthy not only for its summit conference between Kull and Bran Mak Morn, but because it gives Howard a bigger budget and thousands of extras to maneuver on the page, thereby making possible the epic Crusader and Conan-commanded clashes yet to be written.

The hope here has been that newcomers to Kull or Howard will entertain the possibility that, like one of Tuzun Thune's mirrors, heroic fantasy can contain much more than just "hard shallowness"–at times, "gigantic depths

loom up," as with the serpent-men, who have never been bettered, despite all the alien and android fifth columns that followed, as a worst fear made cold flesh. (Like our own reptilian underbrains, they have been here all along.) But readers can entertain this, that, or the other thing at a later date. Now it is high time that they themselves were entertained, enthralled, even enchanted, and this book, in which the young Robert E. Howard finds his way to, and through, an old, old world, is equal to the task. Despite conspiracies serpentine or byzantine, despite all the ghosts and shadows of Kulls past and Cataclysms to come, the pages that follow prove that it remains passing brave, and surpassingly splendid, to be a king, and ride in triumph through the City of Wonders.

Steve Tompkins
2006

Untitled Story

(previously published as “Exile of Atlantis”)

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The sun was setting. A last crimson glory filled the land and lay like a crown of blood on the snow sprinkled peaks. The three men who watched the death of the day breathed deep the fragrance of the early wind which stole up out of the distant forests, and then turned to a task more material. One of the men was cooking venison over a small fire and this man, touching a finger to the smoking viand, tasted with the air of a connoisseur.

"All ready, Kull–Gor-na–let us eat."

The speaker was young–little more than a boy. A tall, slim-waisted, broad-shouldered lad who moved with the easy grace of a leopard. Of his companions, one was an older man, a powerful, massively built hairy man, with an aggressive face. The other was a counterpart of the speaker, except for the fact that he was slightly larger–taller, a thought deeper of chest and broader of shoulder. He gave the impression, even more than the first youth, of dynamic speed concealed in long, smooth muscles.

"Good," said he, "I am hungry."

"When were you ever otherwise?" jeered the first speaker.

"When I am fighting," Kull answered seriously.

The other shot a quick glance at his friend as to fathom his inmost mind; he was not always sure of his friend.

"And then you are blood hungry," broke in the older man. "Am-ra, have done with your bantering and cut us food."

Night began to fall; the stars blinked out. Over the shadowy hill country swept the dusk wind. Far off a tiger roared suddenly. Gor-na made an instinctive motion toward the flint pointed spear which lay beside him. Kull turned his head and a queer light flickered in his cold grey eyes.

"The striped brothers hunt tonight," said he.

"They worship the rising moon." Am-ra indicated the east where a red radiance was becoming evident.

"Why?" asked Kull. "The moon discovers them to their prey and their enemies."

"Once, many hundreds of years ago," said Gor-na, "a king tiger, pursued by hunters, called on the woman in the moon and she flung him down a vine whereby he climbed to safety and abode for many years in the moon. Since then, all the striped people worship the moon."

"I don't believe it," said Kull bluntly. "Why should the striped people worship the moon for aiding one of their race who died so long ago? Many a tiger has scrambled up Death Cliff and escaped the hunters, but they do not worship that cliff. How should they know what took place so long ago?"

Gor-na's brow clouded. "It little becomes you, Kull, to jeer at your elders or to mock the legends of your adopted people. This tale must be true because

it has been handed down from generation unto generation longer than men remember. What always was, must always be."

"I don't believe it," said Kull. "These mountains always were but some day they will crumble and vanish. Some day the sea will flow over these hills–"

"Enough of this blasphemy!" cried Gor-na with a passion that was almost anger. "Kull, we are close friends and I bear with you because of your youth–but one thing you must learn–respect for tradition. You mock at the customs and ways of our people–you whom that people rescued from the wilderness and gave a home and a tribe."

"I was a hairless ape roaming in the woods," admitted Kull frankly and without shame. "I could not speak the language of men and my only friends were the tigers and the wolves. I know not whom my people were, or what blood am I–"

"That matters not," broke in Gor-na. "For all you have the aspect of one of that outlaw tribe who lived in Tiger Valley, and who perished in the Great Flood, it matters little. You have proven yourself a valiant warrior and a mighty hunter–"

"Where will you find a youth to equal him in throwing the spear or in wrestling?" broke in Am-ra, his eyes alight.

"Very true," said Gor-na. "He is a credit to the Sea-mountain tribe, but for all that he must control his mouth, and learn to reverence the holy things of the past and of the present."

"I mock not," said Kull without malice, "but many things the priests say I know to be lies for I have run with the tigers and I know wild beasts better than the priests. Animals are neither gods nor fiends, but men in their way without the lust and greed of man–"

"More blasphemy!" cried Gor-na angrily. "Man is Valka's mightiest

creation.”

Am-ra broke in to change the subject. “I heard the coast drums beating early in the morning. There is war on the sea. Valusia fights the Lemurian pirates.”

“Evil luck to both,” grunted Gor-na.

Kull’s eyes flickered again. “Valusia! Land of Enchantment! Some day I will see the great City of Wonder.”

“Evil the day that you do,” snarled Gor-na.

“You will be loaded with chains with the doom of torture and death hanging over you. No man of our race sees the Great City save as a slave.”

“Evil luck attend her,” muttered Am-ra.

“Black luck and a red doom!” exclaimed Gor-na, shaking his fist toward the east. “For each drop of spilt Atlantean blood, for each slave toiling in their cursed galleys, may a black blight rest on Valusia and all the Seven Empires!”

Am-ra, fired, leapt lithely to his feet and repeated part of the curse; Kull cut himself another slice of cooked meat.

“I have fought the Valusians,” said he, “and they were bravely arrayed but not hard to kill. Nor were they evil featured.”

“You fought the feeble guard of her northern coast,” grunted Gor-na, “or the crew of stranded merchant ships. Wait until you have faced the charge of the Black Squadrons, or the Great Army as have I. Hai! Then there is blood to

drink! With Gandaro of the Spear, I harried the Valusian coasts when I was younger than you, Kull. Aye, we carried the torch and the sword deep into the empire. Five hundred men we were, of all the coast tribes of Atlantis. Four of us returned! Outside the village of Hawks, which we burned and sacked, the van of the Black Squadron smote us! Hai, there the spears drank and the swords were eased of thirst! We slew and they slew, but when the thunder of battle was stilled, four of us escaped from the field, and all of us sore wounded."

"Ascalante tells me," pursued Kull, "that the walls about the Crystal City are ten times the height of a tall man; that the gleam of gold and silver would dazzle the eyes and the women who throng the streets or lean from their windows are robed in strange, smooth robes that rustle and sheen."

"Ascalante should know," grimly said Gor-na, "since he was slave among them so long that he forgot his good Atlantean name and must forsooth abide by the Valusian name they gave him."

"He escaped," commented Am-ra.

"Aye, but for every slave that escapes the clutches of the Seven Empires, seven are rotting in dungeons and dying each day–for it was not meant for an Atlantean to bide as a slave."

"We have been enemies to the Seven Empires since the dawn of time," mused Am-ra.

"And will be until the world crashes," said Gor-na with a savage satisfaction. "For Atlantis, thank Valka, is the foe of all men."

Am-ra rose, taking his spear and prepared to stand watch. The other two lay down on the sward and dropped to sleep. Of what did Gor-na dream? Battle perhaps, or the thunder of buffalo–or a girl of the caves. Kull–

Through the mists of his sleep echoed faintly and far away the golden melody of the trumpets. Clouds of radiant glory floated over him; then a mighty vista opened before his dream self. A great concourse of people stretched away into the distance and a thunderous roar in a strange language went up from them. There was a minor note of steel clashing and great

shadowy armies reined to the right and the left; the mist faded and a face stood out boldly, a face above which hovered a regal crown–a hawk-like face, dispassionate, immobile, with eyes like the grey of the cold sea. Now the people thundered again. “Hail the king! Hail the king! *Kull the King!*”

Kull awoke with a start–the moon glimmered on the distant mountain, the wind sighed through the tall grass. Gor-na slept beside him and Am-ra stood, a naked bronze statue against the stars. Kull’s eyes wandered to his scanty garment–a leopard’s hide twisted about his pantherish loins. A naked barbarian–Kull’s cold eyes glimmered. Kull the king! Again he slept.

They arose in the morning and set out for the caves of the tribe. The sun was not yet high when the broad blue river met their gaze and the caverns of the tribe rose to view.

“Look!” Am-ra cried out sharply. “They burn someone!”

A heavy stake stood before the caves; thereon was a young girl bound. The people who stood about, hard-eyed, showed no sign of pity.

“Ala,” said Gor-na, his face setting into unbending lines. “She married a Lemurian pirate–the wanton.”

“Aye,” broke in a stony eyed old woman, “my own daughter–thus she brought shame on Atlantis–my daughter no longer! Her mate died–she was washed ashore when their ship was broken by the craft of Atlantis.”

Kull eyed the girl compassionately. He couldn’t understand–why did these people, her own kin and blood, frown on her so, merely because she chose an enemy of her race? In all the eyes that were centered on her, Kull saw only one trace of sympathy. Am-ra’s strange blue eyes were sad and compassionate.

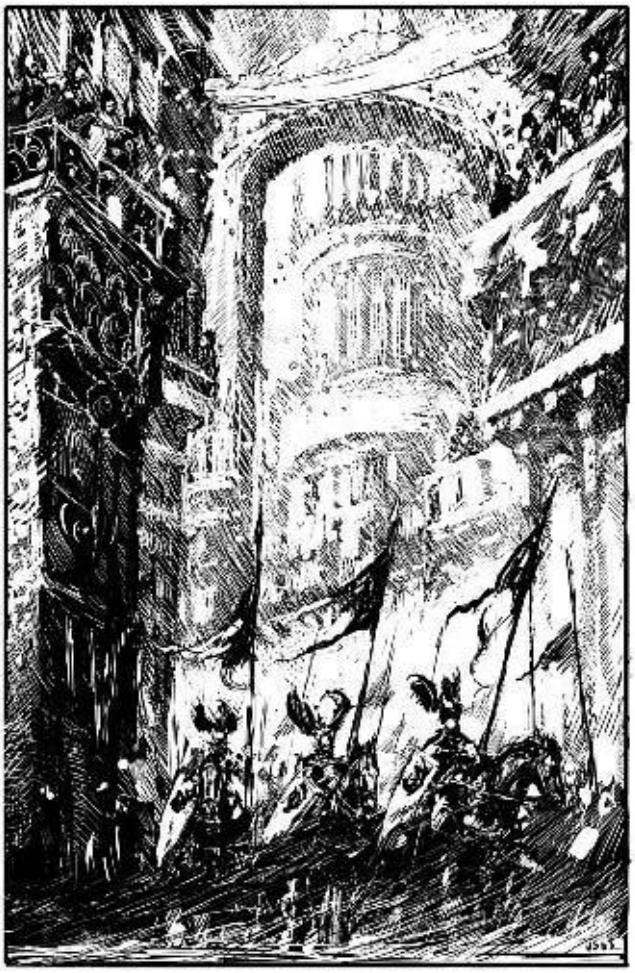
What Kull’s own immobile face mirrored there is no knowing. But the eyes of the doomed girl rested on his. There was no fear in her fine eyes, but a deep and vibrant appeal. Kull’s gaze wandered to the fagots at her feet. Soon the priest, who now chanted a curse beside her, would stoop and light these with the torch which he now held in his left hand. Kull saw that she was bound to the stake with a heavy wooden chain–a peculiar thing which was typically Atlantean in its manufacture. He could not sever that chain, even if

he reached her through the throng that barred his way. Her eyes implored him. He glanced at the fagots; touched the long flint dagger at his girdle. She understood. Nodded, relief flooding her eyes.

Kull struck as suddenly and unexpectedly as a cobra. He snatched the dagger from his girdle and threw it. Fairly under the heart it struck, killing her instantly. While the people stood spell-bound, Kull wheeled, bounded away and ran up the sheer side of the cliff for twenty feet, like a cat. The people stood struck dumb, then a man whipped up bow and arrow and sighted along the smooth shaft. Kull was heaving himself over the lip of the cliff: the bowman’s eyes narrowed–Am-ra, as if by accident, lurched headlong into him and the arrow sang wide and aside. Then Kull was gone.

He heard them screaming on his track; his own tribesmen, fired with the blood lust, wild to run him down and slay him for violating their strange and bloody code of morals. But no man in Atlantis, and that means no man in the world, could foot it with Kull of the Sea-mountain tribe.

The Shadow Kingdom



The Shadow Kingdom

I
A KING COMES RIDING

THE blare of the trumpets grew louder, like a deep golden tide surge, like the soft booming of the evening tides against the silver beaches of Valusia. The throng shouted, women flung roses from the roofs as the rhythmic chiming of silver hoofs came clearer and the first of the mighty array swung into view in the broad white street that curved round the golden-spired Tower of Splendor.

First came the trumpeters, slim youths, clad in scarlet, riding with a flourish of long, slender golden trumpets; next the bowmen, tall men from the mountains; and behind these the heavily armed footmen, their broad shields clashing in unison, their long spears swaying in perfect rhythm to their stride. Behind them came the mightiest soldiery in all the world, the Red Slayers, horsemen, splendidly mounted, armed in red from helmet to spur. Proudly they sat their steeds, looking neither to right nor to left, but aware of the shouting for all that. Like bronze statues they were, and there was never a waver in the forest of spears that reared above them.

Behind those proud and terrible ranks came the motley files of the mercenaries, fierce, wild-looking warriors, men of Mu and of Kaa-u and of the hills of the east and the isles of the west. They bore spears and heavy swords, and a compact group that marched somewhat apart were the bowmen of Lemuria. Then came the light foot of the nation, and more trumpeters brought up the rear.

A brave sight, and a sight which aroused a fierce thrill in the soul of Kull, king of Valusia. Not on the Topaz Throne at the front of the regal Tower of Splendor sat Kull, but in the saddle, mounted on a great stallion, a true warrior king. His mighty arm swung up in reply to the salutes as the hosts passed. His fierce eyes passed the gorgeous trumpeters with a casual glance, rested longer on the following soldiery; they blazed with a ferocious light as the Red Slayers halted in front of him with a clang of arms and a rearing of steeds, and tendered him the crown salute. They narrowed slightly as the mercenaries strode by. They saluted no one, the mercenaries. They walked with shoulders flung back, eyeing Kull boldly and straightly, albeit with a certain appreciation; fierce eyes, unblinking; savage eyes, staring from beneath shaggy manes and heavy brows.

And Kull gave back a like stare. He granted much to brave men, and there were no braver in all the world, not even among the wild tribesmen who now disowned him. But Kull was too much the savage to have any great love for these. There were too many feuds. Many were age-old enemies of Kull’s nation, and though the name of Kull was now a word accursed among the mountains and valleys of his people, and though Kull had put them from his mind, yet the old hates, the ancient passions still lingered. For Kull was no

Valusian but an Atlantean.

The armies swung out of sight around the gem-blazing shoulders of the Tower of Splendor and Kull reined his stallion about and started toward the palace at an easy gait, discussing the review with the commanders that rode with him, using not many words, but saying much.

“The army is like a sword,” said Kull, “and must not be allowed to rust.” So down the street they rode, and Kull gave no heed to any of the whispers that reached his hearing from the throngs that still swarmed the streets.

“That is Kull, see! Valka! But what a king! And what a man! Look at his arms! His shoulders!”

And an undertone of more sinister whisperings: “Kull! Ha, accursed usurper from the pagan isles”–“Aye, shame to Valusia that a barbarian sits on the Throne of Kings.”…

Little did Kull heed. Heavy-handed had he seized the decaying throne of ancient Valusia and with a heavier hand did he hold it, a man against a nation.

After the council chamber, the social palace where Kull replied to the formal and laudatory phrases of the lords and ladies, with carefully hidden, grim amusement at such frivolities; then the lords and ladies took their formal departure and Kull leaned back upon the ermine throne and contemplated matters of state until an attendant requested permission from the great king to speak, and announced an emissary from the Pictish embassy.

Kull brought his mind back from the dim mazes of Valusian statecraft where it had been wandering, and gazed upon the Pict with little favor. The man gave back the gaze of the king without flinching. He was a lean-hipped, massive-chested warrior of middle height, dark, like all his race, and strongly built. From strong, immobile features gazed dauntless and inscrutable eyes.

“The chief of the Councilors, Ka-nu of the tribe, right hand of the king of Pictdom, sends greetings and says: ‘There is a throne at the feast of the rising moon for Kull, king of kings, lord of lords, emperor of Valusia.’”

“Good,” answered Kull. “Say to Ka-nu the Ancient, ambassador of the western isles, that the king of Valusia will quaff wine with him when the moon floats over the hills of Zalgara.”

Still the Pict lingered. “I have a word for the king, not”–with a contemptuous flirt of his hand–“for these slaves.”

Kull dismissed the attendants with a word, watching the Pict warily.

The man stepped nearer, and lowered his voice: “Come alone to feast tonight, lord king. Such was the word of my chief.”

The king’s eyes narrowed, gleaming like gray sword steel, coldly.

“Alone?”

“Aye.”

They eyed each other silently, their mutual tribal enmity seething beneath their cloak of formality. Their mouths spoke the cultured speech, the conventional court phrases of a highly polished race, a race not their own, but from their eyes gleamed the primal traditions of the elemental savage. Kull might be the king of Valusia and the Pict might be an emissary to her courts, but there in the throne hall of kings, two tribesmen glowered at each other, fierce and wary, while ghosts of wild wars and world-ancient feuds whispered to each.

To the king was the advantage and he enjoyed it to its fullest extent. Jaw resting on hand, he eyed the Pict, who stood like an image of bronze, head flung back, eyes unflinching.

Across Kull’s lips stole a smile that was more a sneer.

“And so I am to come–alone?” Civilization had taught him to speak by innuendo and the Pict’s dark eyes glittered, though he made no reply. “How am I to know that you come from Ka-nu?”

“I have spoken,” was the sullen response.

“And when did a Pict speak truth?” sneered Kull, fully aware that the Picts never lied, but using this means to enrage the man.

“I see your plan, king,” the Pict answered imperturbably. “You wish to anger me. By Valka, you need go no further! I am angry enough. And I challenge you to meet me in single battle, spear, sword or dagger, mounted or afoot. Are you king or man?”

Kull’s eyes glinted with the grudging admiration a warrior must needs give a bold foeman, but he did not fail to use the chance of further annoying his antagonist.

“A king does not accept the challenge of a nameless savage,” he sneered, “nor does the emperor of Valusia break the Truce of Ambassadors. You have leave to go. Say to Ka-nu I will come alone.”

The Pict’s eyes flashed murderously. He fairly shook in the grasp of the primitive blood-lust; then, turning his back squarely upon the king of Valusia, he strode across the Hall of Society and vanished through the great door.

Again Kull leaned back upon the ermine throne and meditated.

So the chief of the Council of Picts wished him to come alone? But for what reason? Treachery? Grimly Kull touched the hilt of his great sword. But scarcely. The Picts valued too greatly the alliance with Valusia to break it for any feudal reason. Kull might be a warrior of Atlantis and hereditary enemy of all Picts, but too, he was king of Valusia, the most potent ally of the Men of the West.

Kull reflected long upon the strange state of affairs that made him ally of

ancient foes and foe of ancient friends. He rose and paced restlessly across the hall, with the quick, noiseless tread of a lion. Chains of friendship, tribe and tradition had he broken to satisfy his ambition. And, by Valka, god of the sea and the land, he had realized that ambition! He was king of Valusia–a fading, degenerate Valusia, a Valusia living mostly in dreams of bygone glory, but still a mighty land and the greatest of the Seven Empires. Valusia–Land of Dreams, the tribesmen named it, and sometimes it seemed to Kull that he moved in a dream. Strange to him were the intrigues of court and palace, army and people. All was like a masquerade, where men and women hid their real thoughts with a smooth mask. Yet the seizing of the throne had been easy–a bold snatching of opportunity, the swift whirl of swords, the slaying of a tyrant of whom men had wearied unto death, short, crafty plotting with ambitious statesmen out of favor at court–and Kull, wandering adventurer, Atlantean exile, had swept up to the dizzy heights of his dreams: he was lord of Valusia, king of kings. Yet now it seemed that the seizing was far easier than the keeping. The sight of the Pict had brought back youthful associations to his mind, the free, wild savagery of his boyhood. And now a strange feeling of dim unrest, of unreality, stole over him as of late it had been doing. Who was he, a straightforward man of the seas and the mountain, to rule a race strangely and terribly wise with the mysticisms of antiquity? An ancient race—

"I am Kull!" said he, flinging back his head as a lion flings back his mane. "I am Kull!"

His falcon gaze swept the ancient hall. His self-confidence flowed back…. And in a dim nook of the hall a tapestry moved–slightly.

II
THUS SPAKE THE SILENT HALLS OF VALUSIA

THE moon had not risen, and the garden was lighted with torches aglow in silver cressets when Kull sat down in the throne before the table of Ka-nu, ambassador of the western isles. At his right hand sat the ancient Pict, as much unlike an emissary of that fierce race as a man could be. Ancient was Ka-nu and wise in statecraft, grown old in the game. There was no elemental hatred in the eyes that looked at Kull appraisingly; no tribal traditions hindered his judgments. Long associations with the statesmen of the civilized nations had swept away such cobwebs. Not: who and what is this man? was the question ever foremost in Ka-nu's mind, but: can I use this man, and how?

Tribal prejudices he used only to further his own schemes.

And Kull watched Ka-nu, answering his conversation briefly, wondering if civilization would make of him a thing like the Pict. For Ka-nu was soft and paunchy. Many years had stridden across the sky-rim since Ka-nu had wielded a sword. True, he was old, but Kull had seen men older than he in the forefront of battle. The Picts were a long-lived race. A beautiful girl stood at Ka-nu's elbow, refilling his goblet, and she was kept busy. Meanwhile Ka-nu kept up a running fire of jests and comments, and Kull, secretly contemptuous of his garrulity, nevertheless missed none of his shrewd humor.

At the banquet were Pictish chiefs and statesmen, the latter jovial and easy in their manner, the warriors formally courteous, but plainly hampered by their tribal affinities. Yet Kull, with a tinge of envy, was cognizant of the freedom and ease of the affair as contrasted with like affairs of the Valusian court. Such freedom prevailed in the rude camps of Atlantis–Kull shrugged his shoulders.

After all, doubtless Ka-nu, who had seemed to have forgotten he was a Pict as far as time-hoary custom and prejudice went, was right and he, Kull, would better become a Valusian in mind as in name.

At last when the moon had reached her zenith, Ka-nu, having eaten and drunk as much as any three men there, leaned back upon his divan with a comfortable sigh and said, "Now, get you gone, friends, for the king and I would converse on such matters as concerns not children. Yes, you too, my pretty; yet first let me kiss those ruby lips–so; now dance away, my rose-bloom."

Ka-nu’s eyes twinkled above his white beard as he surveyed Kull, who sat erect, grim and uncompromising.

“You are thinking, Kull,” said the old statesman, suddenly, “that Ka-nu is a useless old reprobate, fit for nothing except to guzzle wine and kiss wenches!”

In fact, this remark was so much in line with his actual thoughts, and so plainly put, that Kull was rather startled, though he gave no sign.

Ka-nu gurgled and his paunch shook with his mirth. “Wine is red and women are soft,” he remarked tolerantly. “But–ha! ha!–think not old Kanu allows either to interfere with business.”

Again he laughed, and Kull moved restlessly. This seemed much like being made sport of, and the king’s scintillant eyes began to glow with a feline light.

Ka-nu reached for the wine-pitcher, filled his beaker and glanced questioningly at Kull, who shook his head irritably.

“Aye,” said Ka-nu equably, “it takes an old head to stand strong drink. I am growing old, Kull, so why should you young men begrudge me such pleasures as we oldsters must find? Ah me, I grow ancient and withered,

friendless and cheerless."

But his looks and expressions failed far of bearing out his words. His rubicund countenance fairly glowed, and his eyes sparkled, so that his white beard seemed incongruous. Indeed, he looked remarkably elfin, reflected Kull, who felt vaguely resentful. The old scoundrel had lost all of the primitive virtues of his race and of Kull's race, yet he seemed more pleased in his aged days than otherwise.

"Hark ye, Kull," said Ka-nu, raising an admonitory finger, "'tis a chancy thing to laud a young man, yet I must speak my true thoughts to gain your confidence."

"If you think to gain it by flattery–"

"Tush. Who spake of flattery? I flatter only to disguard."

There was a keen sparkle in Ka-nu's eyes, a cold glimmer that did not match his lazy smile. He knew men, and he knew that to gain his end he must smite straight with this tigerish barbarian, who, like a wolf scenting a snare, would scent out unerringly any falseness in the skein of his word-web.

"You have power, Kull," said he, choosing his words with more care than he did in the council rooms of the nation, "to make yourself mightiest of all kings, and restore some of the lost glories of Valusia. So. I care little for Valusia–though the women and wine be excellent–save for the fact that the stronger Valusia is, the stronger is the Pict nation. More, with an Atlantean on the throne, eventually Atlantis will become united–"

Kull laughed in harsh mockery. Ka-nu had touched an old wound.

"Atlantis made my name accursed when I went to seek fame and fortune among the cities of the world. We–they–are age-old foes of the Seven Empires, greater foes of the allies of the Empires, as you should know."

Ka-nu tugged his beard and smiled enigmatically.

"Nay, nay. Let it pass. But I know whereof I speak. And then warfare will cease, wherein there is no gain; I see a world of peace and prosperity–man loving his fellow man–the good supreme. All this can you accomplish–*if you live!*"

"Ha!" Kull's lean hand closed on his hilt and he half rose, with a sudden movement of such dynamic speed that Ka-nu, who fancied men as some men fancy blooded horses, felt his old blood leap with a sudden thrill. Valka, what a warrior! Nerves and sinews of steel and fire, bound together with the perfect co-ordination, the fighting instinct, that makes the terrible warrior.

But none of Ka-nu's enthusiasm showed in his mildly sarcastic tone.

"Tush. Be seated. Look about you. The gardens are deserted, the seats empty, save for ourselves. You fear not *me*?"

Kull sank back, gazing about him warily.

“There speaks the savage,” mused Ka-nu. “Think you if I planned treachery I would enact it here where suspicion would be sure to fall upon me? Tut. You young tribesmen have much to learn. There were my chiefs who were not at ease because you were born among the hills of Atlantis, and you despise me in your secret mind because I am a Pict. Tush. I see you as Kull, king of Valusia, not as Kull, the reckless Atlantean, leader of the raiders who harried the western isles. So you should see in me, not a Pict but an international man, a figure of the world. Now to that figure, hark! If you were slain tomorrow who would be king?”

“Kaanuub, baron of Blaal.”

“Even so. I object to Kaanuub for many reasons, yet most of all for the fact that he is but a figurehead.”

“How so? He was my greatest opponent, but I did not know that he championed any cause but his own.”

“The night can hear,” answered Ka-nu obliquely. “There are worlds within worlds. But you may trust me and you may trust Brule, the Spear-slayer. Look!” He drew from his robes a bracelet of gold representing a winged dragon coiled thrice, with three horns of ruby on the head.

“Examine it closely. Brule will wear it on his arm when he comes to you tomorrow night so that you may know him. Trust Brule as you trust yourself, and do what he tells you to. And in proof of trust, look ye!”

And with the speed of a striking hawk, the ancient snatched something from his robes, something that flung a weird green light over them, and which he replaced in an instant.

“The stolen gem!” exclaimed Kull recoiling. “The green jewel from the Temple of the Serpent! Valka! You! And why do you show it to me?”

“To save your life. To prove my trust. If I betray your trust, deal with me likewise. You hold my life in your hand. Now I could not be false to you if I would, for a word from you would be my doom.”

Yet for all his words the old scoundrel beamed merrily and seemed vastly pleased with himself.

“But why do you give me this hold over you?” asked Kull, becoming more bewildered each second.

“As I told you. Now, you see that I do not intend to deal you false, and tomorrow night when Brule comes to you, you will follow his advice without fear of treachery. Enough. An escort waits outside to ride to the palace with you, lord.”

Kull rose. “But you have told me nothing.”

“Tush. How impatient are youths!” Ka-nu looked more like a mischievous elf than ever. “Go you and dream of thrones and power and kingdoms, while I dream of wine and soft women and roses. And fortune ride with you, King Kull.”

As he left the garden, Kull glanced back to see Ka-nu still reclining lazily in his seat, a merry ancient, beaming on all the world with jovial fellowship.

A MOUNTED warrior waited for the king just without the garden and Kull was slightly surprized to see that it was the same that had brought Ka-nu’s invitation. No word was spoken as Kull swung into the saddle nor as they clattered along the empty streets.

The color and the gayety of the day had given away to the eery stillness of night. The city’s antiquity was more than ever apparent beneath the bent, silver moon. The huge pillars of the mansions and palaces towered up into the stars. The broad stairways, silent and deserted, seemed to climb endlessly until they vanished in the shadowy darkness of the upper realms. Stairs to the

stars, thought Kull, his imaginative mind inspired by the weird grandeur of the scene.

Clang! clang! clang! sounded the silver hoofs on the broad, moon-flooded streets, but otherwise there was no sound. The age of the city, its incredible antiquity, was almost oppressive to the king; it was as if the great silent buildings laughed at him, noiselessly, with unguessable mockery. And what secrets did they hold?

"You are young," said the palaces and the temples and the shrines, "but we are old. The world was wild with youth when we were reared. You and your tribe shall pass, but we are invincible, indestructible. We towered above a strange world, ere Atlantis and Lemuria rose from the sea; we still shall reign when the green waters sigh for many a restless fathom above the spires of Lemuria and the hills of Atlantis and when the isles of the Western Men are the mountains of a strange land.

"How many kings have we watched ride down these streets before Kull of Atlantis was even a dream in the mind of Ka, bird of Creation? Ride on, Kull of Atlantis; greater shall follow you; greater came before you. They are dust; they are forgotten; we stand; we know; we are. Ride, ride on, Kull of Atlantis; Kull the king, Kull the fool!"

And it seemed to Kull that the clashing hoofs took up the silent refrain to beat it into the night with hollow re-echoing mockery:

"Kull–the–king! Kull–the–fool!"

Glow, moon; you light a king's way! Gleam, stars; you are torches in the train of an emperor! And clang, silver-shod hoofs; you herald that Kull rides through Valusia.

Ho! Awake, Valusia! It is Kull that rides, Kull the king!

"We have known many kings," said the silent halls of Valusia.

And so in a brooding mood Kull came to the palace, where his bodyguard, men of the Red Slayers, came to take the rein of the great stallion and escort Kull to his rest. There the Pict, still sullenly speechless, wheeled his steed with a savage wrench of the rein and fled away in the dark like a phantom; Kull's heightened imagination pictured him speeding through the silent streets like a goblin out of the Elder World.

There was no sleep for Kull that night, for it was nearly dawn and he spent the rest of the night hours pacing the throneroom, and pondering over what had passed. Ka-nu had told him nothing, yet he had put himself in Kull's complete power. At what had he hinted when he had said the baron of Blaal was naught but a figurehead? And who was this Brule who was to come to him by night, wearing the mystic armlet of the dragon? And why? Above all, why had Ka-nu shown him the green gem of terror, stolen long ago from the temple of the Serpent, for which the world would rock in wars were it known to the weird and terrible keepers of that temple, and from whose vengeance not even Ka-nu's ferocious tribesmen might be able to save him? But Ka-nu knew he was safe, reflected Kull, for the statesman was too shrewd to expose himself to risk without profit. But was it to throw the king off his guard and pave the way to treachery? Would Ka-nu dare let him live now? Kull shrugged his shoulders.

III
THEY THAT WALK THE NIGHT

THE moon had not risen when Kull, hand to hilt, stepped to a window. The windows opened upon the great inner gardens of the royal palace, and the breezes of the night, bearing the scents of spice trees, blew the filmy curtains about. The king looked out. The walks and groves were deserted; carefully trimmed trees were bulky shadows; fountains near by flung their slender sheen of silver in the starlight and distant fountains rippled steadily. No guards walked those gardens, for so closely were the outer walls guarded that it seemed impossible for any invader to gain access to them.

Vines curled up the walls of the palace, and even as Kull mused upon the ease with which they might be climbed, a segment of shadow detached itself from the darkness below the window and a bare, brown arm curved up over the sill. Kull's great sword hissed half-way from the sheath; then the king halted. Upon the muscular forearm gleamed the dragon armlet shown him by Ka-nu the night before.

The possessor of the arm pulled himself up over the sill and into the room with the swift, easy motion of a climbing leopard.

"You are Brule?" asked Kull, and then stopped in surprize not un-mingled with annoyance and suspicion; for the man was he whom Kull had taunted in the Hall of Society; the same who had escorted him from the Pictish embassy.

"I am Brule, the Spear-slayer," answered the Pict in a guarded voice; then swiftly, gazing closely in Kull's face, he said, barely above a whisper:

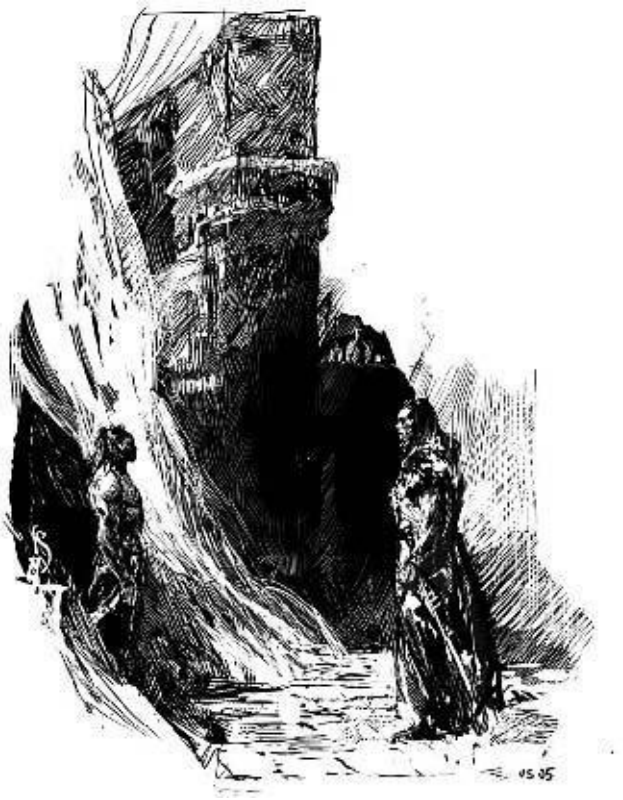
"Ka nama kaa lajerama!"

Kull started. "Ha! What mean you?"

"Know you not?"

"Nay, the words are unfamiliar; they are of no language I ever heard–and yet, by Valka!–somewhere–I have heard–"

"Aye," was the Pict's only comment. His eyes swept the room, the study room of the palace. Except for a few tables, a divan or two and great shelves of books of parchment, the room was barren compared to the grandeur of the rest of the palace.



“Tell me, king, who guards the door?”

“Eighteen of the Red Slayers. But how come you, stealing through the gardens by night and scaling the walls of the palace?”

Brule sneered. “The guards of Valusia are blind buffaloes. I could steal their girls from under their noses. I stole amid them and they saw me not nor heard me. And the walls–I could scale them without the aid of vines. I have hunted tigers on the foggy beaches when the sharp east breezes blew the mist in from seaward and I have climbed the steeps of the western sea mountain. But come–nay, touch this armlet.”

He held out his arm and, as Kull complied wonderingly, gave an apparent sigh of relief.

“So. Now throw off those kingly robes; for there are ahead of you this night such deeds as no Atlantean ever dreamed of.”

Brule himself was clad only in a scanty loin-cloth through which was thrust a short, curved sword.

“And who are you to give me orders?” asked Kull, slightly resentful.

“Did not Ka-nu bid you follow me in all things?” asked the Pict irritably, his eyes flashing momentarily. “I have no love for you, lord, but for the moment I have put the thought of feuds from my mind. Do you likewise. But come.”

Walking noiselessly, he led the way across the room to the door. A slide in the door allowed a view of the outer corridor, unseen from without, and the Pict bade Kull look.

“What see you?”

“Naught but the eighteen guardsmen.”

The Pict nodded, motioned Kull to follow him across the room. At a panel in the opposite wall Brule stopped and fumbled there a moment. Then with a light movement he stepped back, drawing his sword as he did so. Kull gave an exclamation as the panel swung silently open, revealing a dimly lighted passageway.

“A secret passage!” swore Kull softly. “And I knew nothing of it! By Valka, someone shall dance for this!”

“Silence!” hissed the Pict.

Brule was standing like a bronze statue as if straining every nerve for the slightest sound; something about his attitude made Kull’s hair prickle slightly,

not from fear but from some eery anticipation. Then beckoning, Brule stepped through the secret doorway which stood open behind them. The passage was bare, but not dust-covered as should have been the case with an unused secret corridor. A vague, gray light filtered through somewhere, but the source of it was not apparent. Every few feet Kull saw doors, invisible, as he knew, from the outside, but easily apparent from within.

“The palace is a very honeycomb,” he muttered.

“Aye. Night and day you are watched, king, by many eyes.”

The king was impressed by Brule’s manner. The Pict went forward slowly, warily, half crouching, blade held low and thrust forward. When he spoke it was in a whisper and he continually flung glances from side to side.

The corridor turned sharply and Brule warily gazed past the turn.

“Look!” he whispered. “But remember! No word! No sound–on your life!”

Kull cautiously gazed past him. The corridor changed just at the bend to a flight of steps. And then Kull recoiled. At the foot of those stairs lay the eighteen Red Slayers who were that night stationed to watch the king’s study room. Brule’s grip upon his mighty arm and Brule’s fierce whisper at his shoulder alone kept Kull from leaping down those stairs.

“Silent, Kull! Silent, in Valka’s name!” hissed the Pict. “These corridors are empty now, but I risked much in showing you, that you might then believe what I had to say. Back now to the room of study.” And he retraced his steps, Kull following; his mind in a turmoil of bewilderment.

“This is treachery,” muttered the king, his steel-gray eyes a-smolder, “foul and swift! Mere minutes have passed since those men stood at guard.”

Again in the room of study Brule carefully closed the secret panel and motioned Kull to look again through the slit of the outer door. Kull gasped audibly. *For without stood the eighteen guardsmen!*

“This is sorcery!” he whispered, half-drawing his sword. “Do dead men guard the king?”

“Aye!” came Brule’s scarcely audible reply; there was a strange expression in the Pict’s scintillant eyes. They looked squarely into each other’s eyes for an instant, Kull’s brow wrinkled in a puzzled scowl as he strove to read the Pict’s inscrutable face. Then Brule’s lips, barely moving, formed the words:

“The–snake–that–speaks!”

“Silent!” whispered Kull, laying his hand over Brule’s mouth. “That is death to speak! That is a name accursed!”

The Pict’s fearless eyes regarded him steadily.

“Look again, King Kull. Perchance the guard was changed.”

“Nay, those are the same men. In Valka’s name, this is sorcery–this is insanity! I saw with my own eyes the bodies of those men, not eight minutes agone. Yet there they stand.”

Brule stepped back, away from the door, Kull mechanically following.

“Kull, what know ye of the traditions of this race ye rule?”

“Much–and yet, little. Valusia is so old–”

“Aye,” Brule’s eyes lighted strangely, “we are but barbarians–infants compared to the Seven Empires. Not even they themselves know how old they are. Neither the memory of man nor the annals of the historians reach back far enough to tell us when the first men came up from the sea and built cities on the shore. But Kull, *men were not always ruled by men!”*

The king started. Their eyes met.

“Aye, there is a legend of my people–”

“And mine!” broke in Brule. “That was before we of the isles were allied with Valusia. Aye, in the reign of Lion-fang, seventh war chief of the Picts, so many years ago no man remembers how many. Across the sea we came, from the isles of the sunset, skirting the shores of Atlantis, and falling upon the beaches of Valusia with fire and sword. Aye, the long white beaches resounded with the clash of spears, and the night was like day from the flame of the burning castles. And the king, the king of Valusia, who died on the red sea sands that dim day–” His voice trailed off; the two stared at each other, neither speaking; then each nodded.

“Ancient is Valusia!” whispered Kull. “The hills of Atlantis and Mu were isles of the sea when Valusia was young.”

The night breeze whispered through the open window. Not the free, crisp sea air such as Brule and Kull knew and reveled in, in their land, but a breath like a whisper from the past, laden with musk, scents of forgotten things, breathing secrets that were hoary when the world was young.

The tapestries rustled, and suddenly Kull felt like a naked child before the inscrutable wisdom of the mystic past. Again the sense of unreality swept upon him. At the back of his soul stole dim, gigantic phantoms, whispering monstrous things. He sensed that Brule experienced similar thoughts. The Pict's eyes were fixed upon his face with a fierce intensity. Their glances met. Kull felt warmly a sense of comradeship with this member of an enemy tribe. Like rival leopards turning at bay against hunters, these two savages made common cause against the inhuman powers of antiquity.

BRULE again led the way back to the secret door. Silently they entered and silently they proceeded down the dim corridor, taking the opposite direction from that in which they had previously traversed it. After a while the Pict stopped and pressed close to one of the secret doors, bidding Kull look with him through the hidden slot.

"This opens upon a little-used stair which leads to a corridor running past the study-room door."

They gazed, and presently, mounting the stair silently, came a silent shape.

"Tu! Chief councilor!" exclaimed Kull. "By night and with bared dagger! How, what means this, Brule?"

"Murder! And foulest treachery!" hissed Brule. "Nay"–as Kull would have flung the door aside and leaped forth–"we are lost if you meet him here, for more lurk at the foot of those stairs. Come!"

Half running, they darted back along the passage. Back through the secret door Brule led, shutting it carefully behind them, then across the chamber to an opening into a room seldom used. There he swept aside some tapestries in a dim corner nook and, drawing Kull with him, stepped behind them. Minutes dragged. Kull could hear the breeze in the other room blowing the window curtains about, and it seemed to him like the murmur of ghosts. Then through the door, stealthily, came Tu, chief councilor of the king. Evidently he had come through the study room and, finding it empty, sought his victim where he was most likely to be.

He came with upraised dagger, walking silently. A moment he halted, gazing about the apparently empty room, which was lighted dimly by a single candle. Then he advanced cautiously, apparently at a loss to understand the absence of the king. He stood before the hiding place–and–

"Slay!" hissed the Pict.

Kull with a single mighty leap hurled himself into the room. Tu spun, but

the blinding, tigerish speed of the attack gave him no chance for defense or counter-attack. Sword steel flashed in the dim light and grated on bone as Tu toppled backward, Kull's sword standing out between his shoulders.

Kull leaned above him, teeth bared in the killer's snarl, heavy brows a-scowl above eyes that were like the gray ice of the cold sea. Then he released the hilt and recoiled, shaken, dizzy, the hand of death at his spine.

For as he watched, Tu's face became strangely dim and unreal; the features mingled and merged in a seemingly impossible manner. Then, like a fading mask of fog, the face suddenly vanished and in its stead gaped and leered *a monstrous serpent's head!*

“Valka!” gasped Kull, sweat beading his forehead, and again: “Valka!”

Brule leaned forward, face immobile. Yet his glittering eyes mirrored something of Kull’s horror.

“Regain your sword, lord king,” said he. “There are yet deeds to be done.”

Hesitantly Kull set his hand to the hilt. His flesh crawled as he set his foot upon the terror which lay at their feet, and as some jerk of muscular reaction caused the frightful mouth to gape suddenly, he recoiled, weak with nausea. Then, wrathful at himself, he plucked forth his sword and gazed more closely at the nameless thing that had been known as Tu, chief councilor. Save for the reptilian head, the thing was the exact counterpart of a man.

“A man with the head of a snake!” Kull murmured. “This, then, is a priest of the serpent god?”

“Aye. Tu sleeps unknowing. These fiends can take any form they will. That is, they can, by a magic charm or the like, fling a web of sorcery about their faces, as an actor dons a mask, so that they resemble anyone they wish to.”

“Then the old legends were true,” mused the king; “the grim old tales few dare even whisper, lest they die as blasphemers, are no fantasies. By Valka, I had thought–I had guessed–but it seems beyond the bounds of reality. Ha! The guardsmen outside the door–”

“They too are snake-men. Hold! What would you do?”

“Slay them!” said Kull between his teeth.

“Strike at the skull if at all,” said Brule. “Eighteen wait without the door and perhaps a score more in the corridors. Hark ye, king, Ka-nu learned of this plot. His spies have pierced the inmost fastnesses of the snake priests and they brought hints of a plot. Long ago he discovered the secret passageways of the palace, and at his command I studied the map thereof and came here by night to aid you, lest you die as other kings of Valusia have died. I came alone for the reason that to send more would have roused suspicion. Many could not steal into the palace as I did. Some of the foul conspiracy you have seen. Snake-men guard your door, and that one, as Tu, could pass anywhere else in the palace; in the morning, if the priests failed, the real guards would be holding their places again, nothing knowing, nothing remembering; there to take the blame if the priests succeeded. But stay you here while I dispose of this carrion.”

So saying, the Pict shouldered the frightful thing stolidly and vanished with it through another secret panel. Kull stood alone, his mind a-whirl. Neophytes of the mighty serpent, how many lurked among his cities? How might he tell the false from the true? Aye, how many of his trusted councilors, his generals, were men? He could be certain–of whom?

THE secret panel swung inward and Brule entered.

"You were swift."

"Aye!" The warrior stepped forward, eyeing the floor. "There is gore upon the rug. See?"

Kull bent forward; from the corner of his eye he saw a blur of movement, a glint of steel. Like a loosened bow he whipped erect, thrusting upward. The warrior sagged upon the sword, his own clattering to the floor. Even at that instant Kull reflected grimly that it was appropriate that the traitor should meet his death upon the sliding, upward thrust used so much by his race. Then, as Brule slid from the sword to sprawl motionless on the floor, the face began to merge and fade, and as Kull caught his breath, his hair a-prickle, the human features vanished and there the jaws of a great snake gaped hideously, the terrible beady eyes venomous even in death.

"He was a snake priest all the time!" gasped the king. "Valka! what an elaborate plan to throw me off my guard! Ka-nu there, is he a man? Was it Ka-nu to whom I talked in the gardens? Almighty Valka!" as his flesh crawled with a horrid thought; "are the people of Valusia men or are they *all* serpents?"

Undecided he stood, idly seeing that the thing named Brule no longer wore the dragon armlet. A sound made him wheel.

Brule was coming through the secret door.

"Hold!" upon the arm upthrown to halt the king's hovering sword gleamed the dragon armlet. "Valka!" The Pict stopped short. Then a grim smile curled his lips.

"By the gods of the seas! These demons are crafty past reckoning. For it must be that that one lurked in the corridors, and seeing me go carrying the carcass of that other, took my appearance. So. I have another to do away with."

"Hold!" there was the menace of death in Kull's voice; "I have seen two men turn to serpents before my eyes. How may I know if you are a true man?"

Brule laughed. "For two reasons, King Kull. No snake-man wears this"–he indicated the dragon armlet–"nor can any say these words," and again Kull heard the strange phrase: *"Ka nama kaa lajerama."*

"Ka nama kaa lajerama," Kull repeated mechanically. "Now where, in Valka's name, have I heard that? I have not! And yet–and yet–"

"Aye, you remember, Kull," said Brule. "Through the dim corridors of

memory those words lurk; though you never heard them in this life, yet in the bygone ages they were so terribly impressed upon the soul mind that never dies, that they will always strike dim chords in your memory, though you be reincarnated for a million years to come. For that phrase has come secretly down the grim and bloody eons, since when, uncounted centuries ago, those words were watchwords for the race of men who battled with the grisly beings of the Elder Universe. For none but a real man of men may speak them, whose jaws and mouth are shaped different from any other creature. Their meaning has been forgotten but not the words themselves."

"True," said Kull. "I remember the legends–Valka!" He stopped short, staring, for suddenly, like the silent swinging wide of a mystic door, misty, unfathomed reaches opened in the recesses of his consciousness and for an instant he seemed to gaze back through the vastnesses that spanned life and life; seeing through the vague and ghostly fogs dim shapes reliving dead centuries–men in combat with hideous monsters, vanquishing a planet of frightful terrors. Against a gray, ever-shifting background moved strange nightmare forms, fantasies of lunacy and fear; and man, the jest of the gods, the blind, wisdomless striver from dust to dust, following the long bloody trail of his destiny, knowing not why, bestial, blundering, like a great murderous child, yet feeling somewhere a spark of divine fire…. Kull drew a hand across his brow, shaken; these sudden glimpses into the abysses of memory always startled him.

"They are gone," said Brule, as if scanning his secret mind; "the bird-women, the harpies, the bat-men, the flying fiends, the wolf-people, the demons, the goblins–all save such as this being that lies at our feet, and a few of the wolf-men. Long and terrible was the war, lasting through the bloody centuries, since first the first men, risen from the mire of apedom, turned upon those who then ruled the world.

And at last man-kind conquered, so long ago that naught but dim legends come to us through the ages. The snake-people were the last to go, yet at last

men conquered even them and drove them forth into the waste lands of the world, there to mate with true snakes until some day, say the sages, the horrid breed shall vanish utterly. Yet the Things returned in crafty guise as men grew soft and degenerate, forgetting ancient wars. Ah, that was a grim and secret war! Among the men of the Younger Earth stole the frightful monsters of the Elder Planet, safeguarded by their horrid wisdom and mysticisms, taking all forms and shapes, doing deeds of horror secretly. No man knew who was true man and who false. No man could trust any man. Yet by means of their own craft they formed ways by which the false might be known from the true. Men took for a sign and a standard the figure of the flying dragon, the winged dinosaur, a monster of past ages, which was the greatest foe of the serpent. And men used those words which I spoke to you as a sign and symbol, for as I said, none but a true man can repeat them. So mankind triumphed. Yet again the fiends came after the years of forgetfulness had gone by–for man is still an ape in that he forgets what is not ever before his eyes. As priests they came; and for that men in their luxury and might had by then lost faith in the old religions and worships, the snake-men, in the guise of teachers of a new and truer cult, built a monstrous religion about the worship of the serpent god. Such is their power that it is now death to repeat the old legends of the snake-people, and people bow again to the serpent god in new form; and blind fools that they are, the great hosts of men see no connection between this power and the power men overthrew eons ago. As priests the snake-men are content to rule–and yet–" He stopped.

“Go on.” Kull felt an unaccountable stirring of the short hair at the base of his scalp.

“Kings have reigned as true men in Valusia,” the Pict whispered, “and yet, slain in battle, have died serpents–as died he who fell beneath the spear of Lion-fang on the red beaches when we of the isles harried the Seven Empires. And how can this be, Lord Kull? These kings were born of women and lived as men! This–the true kings died in secret–as you would have died tonight–and priests of the Serpent reigned in their stead, no man knowing.”

Kull cursed between his teeth. “Aye, it must be. No one has ever seen a priest of the Serpent and lived, that is known. They live in utmost secrecy.”

“The statecraft of the Seven Empires is a mazy, monstrous thing,” said Brule. “There the true men know that among them glide the spies of the serpent, and the men who are the Serpent’s allies–such as Kaanuub, baron of Blaal–yet no man dares seek to unmask a suspect lest vengeance befall him. No man trusts his fellow and the true statesmen dare not speak to each other what is in the minds of all. Could they be sure, could a snake-man or plot be unmasked before them all, then would the power of the Serpent be more than half broken; for all would then ally and make common cause, sifting out the traitors. Ka-nu alone is of sufficient shrewdness and courage to cope with them, and even Ka-nu learned only enough of their plot to tell me what would happen–what has happened up to this time. Thus far I was prepared; from now on we must trust to our luck and our craft. Here and now I think we are

safe; those snake-men without the door dare not leave their post lest true men come here unexpectedly. But tomorrow they will try something else, you may be sure. Just what they will do, none can say, not even Ka-nu; but we must stay at each other's sides, King Kull, until we conquer or both be dead. Now come with me while I take this carcass to the hiding-place where I took the other being."

KULL followed the Pict with his grisly burden through the secret panel and down the dim corridor. Their feet, trained to the silence of the wilderness, made no noise. Like phantoms they glided through the ghostly light, Kull wondering that the corridors should be deserted; at every turn he expected to run full upon some frightful apparition. Suspicion surged back upon him; was this Pict leading him into ambush? He fell back a pace or two behind Brule, his ready sword hovering at the Pict's unheeding back. Brule should die first if he meant treachery. But if the Pict was aware of the king's suspicion, he showed no sign. Stolidly he tramped along, until they came to a room, dusty and long unused, where moldy tapestries hung heavy. Brule drew aside some

of these and concealed the corpse behind them.

Then they turned to retrace their steps, when suddenly Brule halted with such abruptness that he was closer to death than he knew; for Kull's nerves were on edge.

"Something moving in the corridor," hissed the Pict. "Ka-nu said these ways would be empty, yet–"

He drew his sword and stole into the corridor, Kull following warily.

A short way down the corridor a strange, vague glow appeared that came toward them. Nerves a-leap, they waited, backs to the corridor wall; for what they knew not, but Kull heard Brule's breath hiss through his teeth and was reassured as to Brule's loyalty.

The glow merged into a shadowy form. A shape vaguely like a man it was, but misty and illusive, like a wisp of fog, that grew more tangible as it approached, but never fully material. A face looked at them, a pair of luminous great eyes, that seemed to hold all the tortures of a million centuries. There was no menace in that face, with its dim, worn features, but only a great pity–and that face–that face–

"Almighty gods!" breathed Kull, an icy hand at his soul; "Eallal, king of Valusia, who died a thousand years ago!"

Brule shrank back as far as he could, his narrow eyes widened in a blaze of pure horror, the sword shaking in his grip, unnerved for the first time that weird night. Erect and defiant stood Kull, instinctively holding his useless sword at the ready; flesh a-crawl, hair a-prickle, yet still a king of kings, as ready to challenge the powers of the unknown dead as the powers of the living.

The phantom came straight on, giving them no heed; Kull shrank back as it passed them, feeling an icy breath like a breeze from the arctic snow. Straight on went the shape with slow, silent footsteps, as if the chains of all the ages were upon those vague feet; vanishing about a bend of the corridor.

"Valka!" muttered the Pict, wiping the cold beads from his brow; "that was no man! That was a ghost!"

“Aye!” Kull shook his head wonderingly. “Did you not recognize the face? That was Eallal, who reigned in Valusia a thousand years ago and who was found hideously murdered in his throneroom–the room now known as the Accursed Room. Have you not seen his statue in the Fame Room of Kings?”

“Yes, I remember the tale now. Gods, Kull! that is another sign of the frightful and foul power of the snake priests–that king was slain by snake-people and thus his soul became their slave, to do their bidding throughout eternity! For the sages have ever maintained that if a man is slain by a snake-man his ghost becomes their slave.”

A shudder shook Kull’s gigantic frame. “Valka! But what a fate! Hark ye”–his fingers closed upon Brule’s sinewy arm like steel–“hark ye! If I am wounded unto death by these foul monsters, swear that ye will smite your sword through my breast lest my soul be enslaved.”

“I swear,” answered Brule, his fierce eyes lighting. “And do ye the same by me, Kull.”

Their strong right hands met in a silent sealing of their bloody bargain.

IV
MASKS

KULL sat upon his throne and gazed broodingly out upon the sea of faces turned toward him. A courtier was speaking in evenly modulated tones, but the king scarcely heard him. Close by, Tu, chief councilor, stood ready at Kull's command, and each time the king looked at him, Kull shuddered inwardly. The surface of court life was as the unrippled surface of the sea between tide and tide. To the musing king the affairs of the night before seemed as a dream, until his eyes dropped to the arm of his throne. A brown, sinewy hand rested there, upon the wrist of which gleamed a dragon armlet; Brule stood beside his throne and ever the Pict's fierce secret whisper brought him back from the realm of unreality in which he moved.

No, that was no dream, that monstrous interlude. As he sat upon his throne in the Hall of Society and gazed upon the courtiers, the ladies, the lords, the statesmen, he seemed to see their faces as things of illusion, things unreal, existent only as shadows and mockeries of substance. Always he had seen their faces as masks, but before he had looked on them with contemptuous tolerance, thinking to see beneath the masks shallow, puny souls, avaricious, lustful, deceitful; now there was a grim undertone, a sinister meaning, a vague horror that lurked beneath the smooth masks. While he exchanged courtesies with some nobleman or councilor he seemed to see the smiling face fade like smoke and the frightful jaws of a serpent gaping there. How many of those he looked upon were horrid, inhuman monsters, plotting his death, beneath the smooth mesmeric illusion of a human face?

Valusia–land of dreams and nightmares–a kingdom of the shadows, ruled by phantoms who glided back and forth behind the painted curtains, mocking the futile king who sat upon the throne–himself a shadow.

And like a comrade shadow Brule stood by his side, dark eyes glittering from immobile face. A real man, Brule! And Kull felt his friendship for the savage become a thing of reality and sensed that Brule felt a friendship for him beyond the mere necessity of statecraft.

And what, mused Kull, were the realities of life? Ambition, power, pride? The friendship of man, the love of women–which Kull had never known–battle, plunder, what? Was it the real Kull who sat upon the throne or was it the real Kull who had scaled the hills of Atlantis, harried the far isles of the sunset, and laughed upon the green roaring tides of the Atlantean sea? How could a man be so many different men in a lifetime? For Kull knew that there were many Kulls and he wondered which was the real Kull. After all, the priests of the Serpent merely went a step further in their magic, for all men wore masks, and many a different mask with each different man or woman; and Kull wondered if a serpent did not lurk under every mask.

So he sat and brooded in strange, mazy thought ways, and the courtiers came and went and the minor affairs of the day were completed, until at last the king and Brule sat alone in the Hall of Society save for the drowsy attendants.

Kull felt a weariness. Neither he nor Brule had slept the night before, nor had Kull slept the night before that, when in the gardens of Ka-nu he had had his first hint of the weird things to be. Last night nothing further had occurred after they had returned to the study room from the secret corridors, but they had neither dared nor cared to sleep. Kull, with the incredible vitality of a wolf, had aforetime gone for days upon days without sleep, in his wild savage days, but now his mind was edged from constant thinking and from the nerve-breaking eeriness of the past night. He needed sleep, but sleep was furthest from his mind.

And he would not have dared sleep if he had thought of it.

Another thing that had shaken him was the fact that though he and Brule had kept a close watch to see if, or when, the study-room guard was changed, yet it was changed without their knowledge; for the next morning those who stood on guard were able to repeat the magic words of Brule, but they remembered nothing out of the ordinary. They thought that they had stood at guard all night, as usual, and Kull said nothing to the contrary. He believed them true men, but Brule had advised absolute secrecy, and Kull also thought it best.

Now Brule leaned over the throne, lowering his voice so not even a lazy attendant could hear: “They will strike soon, I think, Kull. A while ago Kanu gave me a secret sign. The priests know that we know of their plot, of course, but they know not how much we know. We must be ready for any sort of action. Ka-nu and the Pictish chiefs will remain within hailing distance now until this is settled one way or another. Ha, Kull, if it comes to a pitched battle, the streets and the castles of Valusia will run red!”

Kull smiled grimly. He would greet any sort of action with a ferocious joy. This wandering in a labyrinth of illusion and magic was extremely irksome to his nature. He longed for the leap and clang of swords, for the joyous freedom of battle.

Then into the Hall of Society came Tu again, and the rest of the councilors.

“Lord king, the hour of the council is at hand and we stand ready to escort you to the council room.”

KULL rose, and the councilors bent the knee as he passed through the way opened by them for his passage, rising behind him and following. Eyebrows were raised as the Pict strode defiantly behind the king, but no one dissented. Brule's challenging gaze swept the smooth faces of the councilors with the defiance of an intruding savage.

The group passed through the halls and came at last to the council chamber. The door was closed, as usual, and the councilors arranged themselves in the order of their rank before the dais upon which stood the king. Like a bronze statue Brule took up his stand behind Kull.

Kull swept the room with a swift stare. Surely no chance of treachery here. Seventeen councilors there were, all known to him; all of them had espoused his cause when he ascended the throne.

"Men of Valusia–" he began in the conventional manner, then halted, perplexed. The councilors had risen as a man and were moving toward him. There was no hostility in their looks, but their actions were strange for a council room. The foremost was close to him when Brule sprang forward, crouched like a leopard.

"Ka nama kaa lajerama!" his voice crackled through the sinister silence of the room and the foremost councilor recoiled, hand flashing to his robes; and like a spring released Brule moved and the man pitched headlong to the glint of his sword–headlong he pitched and lay still while his face faded and became the head of a mighty snake.

"Slay, Kull!" rasped the Pict's voice. "They be all serpent men!"

The rest was a scarlet maze. Kull saw the familiar faces dim like fading fog and in their places gaped horrid reptilian visages as the whole band rushed forward. His mind was dazed but his giant body faltered not.

The singing of his sword filled the room, and the onrushing flood broke in a red wave. But they surged forward again, seemingly willing to fling their lives away in order to drag down the king. Hideous jaws gaped at him; terrible eyes blazed into his unblinkingly; a frightful fetid scent pervaded the atmosphere–the serpent scent that Kull had known in southern jungles. Swords and daggers leaped at him and he was dimly aware that they wounded him. But Kull was in his element; never before had he faced such grim foes but it mattered little; they lived, their veins held blood that could be spilt and they died when his great sword cleft their skulls or drove through their bodies. Slash, thrust, thrust and swing. Yet had Kull died there but for the man who crouched at his side, parrying and thrusting. For the king was clear berserk, fighting in the terrible Atlantean way, that seeks death to deal death; he made no effort to avoid thrusts and slashes, standing straight up and ever plunging forward, no thought in his frenzied mind but to slay. Not often did Kull forget

his fighting craft in his primitive fury, but now some chain had broken in his soul, flooding his mind with a red wave of slaughter-lust. He slew a foe at each blow, but they surged about him, and time and again Brule turned a thrust that would have slain, as he crouched beside Kull, parrying and warding with cold skill, slaying not as Kull slew with long slashes and plunges, but with short overhand blows and upward thrusts.

Kull laughed, a laugh of insanity. The frightful faces swirled about him in a scarlet blaze. He felt steel sink into his arm and dropped his sword in a flashing arc that cleft his foe to the breast-bone. Then the mists faded and the king saw that he and Brule stood alone above a sprawl of hideous crimson figures who lay still upon the floor.

"Valka! what a killing!" said Brule, shaking the blood from his eyes. "Kull, had these been warriors who knew how to use the steel, we had died here. These serpent priests know naught of swordcraft and die easier than any men I ever slew. Yet had there been a few more, I think the matter had ended otherwise."

Kull nodded. The wild berserker blaze had passed, leaving a mazed feeling of great weariness. Blood seeped from wounds on breast, shoulder, arm and leg. Brule, himself bleeding from a score of flesh wounds, glanced at him in some concern.

"Lord Kull, let us hasten to have your wounds dressed by the women."

Kull thrust him aside with a drunken sweep of his mighty arm.

"Nay, we'll see this through ere we cease. Go you, though, and have your wounds seen to–I command it."

The Pict laughed grimly. "Your wounds are more than mine, lord king–" he began, then stopped as a sudden thought struck him. "By Valka, Kull, this is not the council room!"

Kull looked about and suddenly other fogs seemed to fade. "Nay, this is the room where Eallal died a thousand years ago–since unused and named 'Accursed.'"

"Then by the gods, they tricked us after all!" exclaimed Brule in a fury, kicking the corpses at their feet. "They caused us to walk like fools into their ambush! By their magic they changed the appearance of all–"

"Then there is further deviltry afoot," said Kull, "for if there be true men in the councils of Valusia they should be in the real council room now. Come swiftly."

And leaving the room with its ghastly keepers they hastened through halls that seemed deserted until they came to the real council room. Then Kull halted with a ghastly shudder. *From the council room sounded a voice speaking, and the voice was his!*

WITH a hand that shook he parted the tapestries and gazed into the room. There sat the councilors, counterparts of the men he and Brule had just slain, and upon the dais stood Kull, king of Valusia.

He stepped back, his mind reeling.

“This is insanity!” he whispered. “Am I Kull? Do I stand here or is that Kull yonder in very truth and am I but a shadow, a figment of thought?”

Brule’s hand clutching his shoulder, shaking him fiercely, brought him to his senses.

“Valka’s name, be not a fool! Can you yet be astounded after all we have seen? See you not that those are true men bewitched by a snake-man who has taken your form, as those others took their forms? By now you should have been slain and yon monster reigning in your stead, unknown by those who bowed to you. Leap and slay swiftly or else we are undone. The Red Slayers, true men, stand close on each hand and none but you can reach and slay him. Be swift!”

Kull shook off the onrushing dizziness, flung back his head in the old, defiant gesture. He took a long, deep breath as does a strong swimmer before

diving into the sea; then, sweeping back the tapestries, made the dais in a single lionlike bound. Brule had spoken truly. There stood men of the Red Slayers, guardsmen trained to move quick as the striking leopard; any but Kull had died ere he could reach the usurper. But the sight of Kull, identical with the man upon the dais, held them in their tracks, their minds stunned for an instant, and that was long enough. He upon the dais snatched for his sword, but even as his fingers closed upon the hilt, Kull's sword stood out behind his shoulders and the thing that men had thought the king pitched forward from the dais to lie silent upon the floor.

"Hold!" Kull's lifted hand and kingly voice stopped the rush that had started, and while they stood astounded he pointed to the thing which lay before them–whose face was fading in to that of a snake. They recoiled, and from one door came Brule and from another came Ka-nu.

These grasped the king's bloody hand and Ka-nu spoke: "Men of Valusia, you have seen with your own eyes. This is the true Kull, the mightiest king to whom Valusia has ever bowed. The power of the Serpent is broken and ye be all true men. King Kull, have you commands?"

"Lift that carrion," said Kull, and men of the guard took up the thing.

"Now follow me," said the king, and he made his way to the Accursed Room. Brule, with a look of concern, offered the support of his arm but Kull shook him off.

The distance seemed endless to the bleeding king, but at last he stood at the door and laughed fiercely and grimly when he heard the horrified ejaculations of the councilors.

At his orders the guardsmen flung the corpse they carried beside the others, and motioning all from the room Kull stepped out last and closed the door.

A wave of dizziness left him shaken. The faces turned to him, pallid and wonderingly, swirled and mingled in a ghostly fog. He felt the blood from his wounds trickling down his limbs and he knew that what he was to do, he must do quickly or not at all.

His sword rasped from its sheath.

“Brule, are you there?”

“Aye!” Brule’s face looked at him through the mist, close to his shoulder, but Brule’s voice sounded leagues and eons away.

“Remember our vow, Brule. And now, bid them stand back.”

His left arm cleared a space as he flung up his sword. Then with all his waning power he drove it through the door into the jamb, driving the great sword to the hilt and sealing the room forever.

Legs braced wide, he swayed drunkenly, facing the horrified councilors. “Let this room be doubly accursed. And let those rotting skeletons lie there forever as a sign of the dying might of the serpent. Here I swear that I shall hunt the serpent-men from land to land, from sea to sea, giving no rest until all be slain, that good triumph and the power of Hell be broken. This thing I swear–I–Kull–king–of–Valusia.”

His knees buckled as the faces swayed and swirled. The councilors leaped forward, but ere they could reach him, Kull slumped to the floor, and lay still, face upward.

The councilors surged about the fallen king, chattering and shrieking. Ka-nu beat them back with his clenched fists, cursing savagely.

“Back, you fools! Would you stifle the little life that is yet in him? How, Brule, is he dead or will he live?”–to the warrior who bent above the prostrate Kull.

“Dead?” sneered Brule irritably. “Such a man as this is not so easily killed. Lack of sleep and loss of blood have weakened him–by Valka, he has a score of deep wounds, but none of them mortal. Yet have those gibbering fools bring the court women here at once.”

Brule’s eyes lighted with a fierce, proud light.

“Valka, Ka-nu, but here is such a man as I knew not existed in these degenerate days. He will be in the saddle in a few scant days and then may the serpent-men of the world beware of Kull of Valusia. Valka! but that will be a rare hunt! Ah, I see long years of prosperity for the world with such a king upon the throne of Valusia.”

The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune

The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune

A wild, weird clime that lieth sublime
Out of Space, out of Time.

—Poe

THERE comes, even to kings, the time of great weariness. Then the gold of the throne is brass, the silk of the palace becomes drab. The gems in the diadem and upon the fingers of the women sparkle drearily like the ice of the

white seas; the speech of men is as the empty rattle of a jester's bell and the feel comes of things unreal; even the sun is copper in the sky and the breath of the green ocean is no longer fresh.

Kull sat upon the throne of Valusia and the hour of weariness was upon him. They moved before him in an endless, meaningless panorama, men, women, priests, events and shadows of events; things seen and things to be attained. But like shadows they came and went, leaving no trace upon his consciousness, save that of a great mental fatigue. Yet Kull was not tired. There was a longing in him for things beyond himself and beyond the Valusian court. An unrest stirred in him and strange, luminous dreams roamed his soul. At his bidding there came to him Brule the Spear-slayer, warrior of Pictland, from the islands beyond the West.

"Lord king, you are tired of the life of the court. Come with me upon my galley and let us roam the tides for a space."

"Nay." Kull rested his chin moodily upon his mighty hand. "I am weary beyond all these things. The cities hold no lure for me–and the borders are quiet. I hear no more the sea-songs I heard when I lay as a boy on the booming crags of Atlantis, and the night was alive with blazing stars. No more do the green woodlands beckon me as of old. There is a strangeness upon me and a longing beyond life's longings. Go!"

Brule went forth in a doubtful mood, leaving the king brooding upon his throne. Then to Kull stole a girl of the court and whispered:

"Great king, seek Tuzun Thune, the wizard. The secrets of life and death are his, and the stars in the sky and the lands beneath the seas."

Kull looked at the girl. Fine gold was her hair and her violet eyes were slanted strangely; she was beautiful, but her beauty meant little to Kull.

"Tuzun Thune," he repeated. "Who is he?"

"A wizard of the Elder Race. He lives here, in Valusia, by the Lake of Visions in the House of a Thousand Mirrors. All things are known to him, lord king; he speaks with the dead and holds converse with the demons of the Lost Lands."

Kull arose.

"I will seek out this mummer; but no word of my going, do you hear?"

"I am your slave, my lord." And she sank to her knees meekly, but the smile of her scarlet mouth was cunning behind Kull's back and the gleam of her narrow eyes was crafty.

KULL came to the house of Tuzun Thune, beside the Lake of Visions. Wide and blue stretched the waters of the lake and many a fine palace rose upon its banks; many swan-winged pleasure boats drifted lazily upon its hazy surface and evermore there came the sound of soft music.

Tall and spacious, but unpretentious, rose the House of a Thousand Mirrors. The great doors stood open and Kull ascended the broad stair and entered, unannounced. There in a great chamber, whose walls were of mirrors, he came upon Tuzun Thune, the wizard. The man was ancient as the hills of Zalgara; like wrinkled leather was his skin, but his cold gray eyes were like sparks of sword steel.

“Kull of Valusia, my house is yours,” said he, bowing with old-time courtliness and motioning Kull to a throne-like chair.

“You are a wizard, I have heard,” said Kull bluntly, resting his chin upon his hand and fixing his somber eyes upon the man’s face. “Can you do wonders?”

The wizard stretched forth his hand; his fingers opened and closed like a bird’s claws.

“Is that not a wonder–that this blind flesh obeys the thoughts of my mind? I walk, I breathe, I speak–are they all not wonders?”

Kull meditated awhile, then spoke. “Can you summon up demons?”

“Aye. I can summon up a demon more savage than any in ghostland–by smiting you in the face.”

Kull started, then nodded. “But the dead, can you talk to the dead?”

“I talk with the dead always–as I am talking now. Death begins with birth and each man begins to die when he is born; even now you are dead, King Kull, because you were born.”

“But you, you are older than men become; do wizards never die?”

“Men die when their time comes. No later, no sooner. Mine has not

come.”

Kull turned these answers over in his mind.

“Then it would seem that the greatest wizard of Valusia is no more than an ordinary man, and I have been duped in coming here.”

Tuzun Thune shook his head. “Men are but men, and the greatest men are they who soonest learn the simpler things. Nay, look into my mirrors, Kull.”

The ceiling was a great many mirrors, and the walls were mirrors, perfectly jointed, yet many mirrors of many sizes and shapes.

“Mirrors are the world, Kull,” droned the wizard. “Gaze into my mirrors and be wise.”

Kull chose one at random and looked into it intently. The mirrors upon the opposite wall were reflected there, reflecting others, so that he seemed to be gazing down a long, luminous corridor, formed by mirror behind mirror; and far down this corridor moved a tiny figure. Kull looked long ere he saw that the figure was the reflection of himself. He gazed and a queer feeling of pettiness came over him; it seemed that that tiny figure was the true Kull, representing the real proportions of himself. So he moved away and stood before another.

“Look closely, Kull. That is the mirror of the past,” he heard the wizard say.

Gray fogs obscured the vision, great billows of mist, ever heaving and changing like the ghost of a great river; through these fogs Kull caught swift

fleeting visions of horror and strangeness; beasts and men moved there and shapes neither men nor beasts; great exotic blossoms glowed through the grayness; tall tropic trees towered high over reeking swamps, where reptilian monsters wallowed and bellowed; the sky was ghastly with flying dragons and the restless seas rocked and roared and beat endlessly along the muddy beaches. Man was not, yet man was the dream of the gods and strange were the nightmare forms that glided through the noisome jungles. Battle and onslaught were there, and frightful love. Death was there, for Life and Death go hand in hand. Across the slimy beaches of the world sounded the bellowing of the monsters, and incredible shapes loomed through the steaming curtain of the incessant rain.

"This is of the future."

Kull looked in silence.

"See you–what?"

"A strange world," said Kull heavily. "The Seven Empires are crumbled to dust and are forgotten. The restless green waves roar for many a fathom above the eternal hills of Atlantis; the mountains of Lemuria of the West are the islands of an unknown sea. Strange savages roam the elder lands and new lands flung strangely from the deeps, defiling the elder shrines. Valusia is vanished and all the nations of today; they of tomorrow are strangers. They know us not."

"Time strides onward," said Tuzun Thune calmly. "We live today; what care we for tomorrow–or yesterday? The Wheel turns and nations rise and fall; the world changes, and times return to savagery to rise again through the long ages. Ere Atlantis was, Valusia was, and ere Valusia was, the Elder Nations were. Aye, we, too, trampled the shoulders of lost tribes in our

advance. You, who have come from the green sea hills of Atlantis to seize the ancient crown of Valusia, you think my tribe is old, we who held these lands ere the Valusians came out of the East, in the days before there were men in the sea lands. But men were here when the Elder Tribes rode out of the waste lands, and men before men, tribe before tribe. The nations pass and are forgotten, for that is the destiny of man."

"Yes," said Kull. "Yet is it not a pity that the beauty and glory of men should fade like smoke on a summer sea?"

"For what reason, since that is their destiny? I brood not over the lost glories of my race, nor do I labor for races to come. Live now, Kull, live now. The dead are dead; the unborn are not. What matters men's forgetfulness of you when you have forgotten yourself in the silent worlds of death? Gaze in my mirrors and be wise."

Kull chose another mirror and gazed into it.

"That is the mirror of the deepest magic; what see ye, Kull?"

"Naught but myself."

"Look closely, Kull; is it in truth you?"

Kull stared into the great mirror, and the image that was his reflection returned his gaze.

"I come before this mirror," mused Kull, chin on fist, "and I bring this man to life. This is beyond my understanding, since first I saw him in the still waters of the lakes of Atlantis, till I saw him again in the gold-rimmed mirrors of Valusia. He is I, a shadow of myself, part of myself–I can bring him into being or slay him at my will; yet"–he halted, strange thoughts whispering through the vast dim recesses of his mind like shadowy bats flying through a great cavern–"yet where is he when I stand not in front of a mirror? May it be in man's power thus lightly to form and destroy a shadow of life and existence? How do I know that when I step back from the mirror he vanishes into the void of Naught?

"Nay, by Valka, am I the man or is he? Which of us is the ghost of the other? Mayhap these mirrors are but windows through which we look into another world. Does he think the same of me? Am I no more than a shadow, a reflection of himself–to him, as he to me? And if I am the ghost, what sort of a world lives upon the other side of this mirror? What armies ride there and what kings rule? This world is all I know. Knowing naught of any other, how can I judge? Surely there are green hills there and booming seas and wide plains where men ride to battle. Tell me, wizard who are wiser than most men, tell me, are there worlds beyond our worlds?"

"A man has eyes, let him see," answered the wizard. "Who would see must first believe."

THE hours drifted by and Kull still sat before the mirrors of Tuzun Thune, gazing into that which depicted himself. Sometimes it seemed that he gazed upon hard shallowness; at other times gigantic depths seemed to loom before him. Like the surface of the sea was the mirror of Tuzun Thune; hard as the sea in the sun's slanting beams, in the darkness of the stars, when no eye can pierce her deeps; vast and mystic as the sea when the sun smites her in such way that the watcher's breath is caught at the glimpse of tremendous abysses. So was the mirror in which Kull gazed.

At last the king rose with a sigh and took his departure still wondering. And Kull came again to the House of a Thousand Mirrors; day after day he came and sat for hours before the mirror. The eyes looked out at him, identical with his, yet Kull seemed to sense a difference–a reality that was not of him. Hour upon hour he would stare with strange intensity into the mirror; hour after hour the image gave back his gaze.

The business of the palace and of the council went neglected. The people murmured; Kull's stallion stamped restlessly in his stable and Kull's warriors diced and argued aimlessly with one another. Kull heeded not. At times he seemed on the point of discovering some vast, unthinkable secret. He no longer thought of the image in the mirror as a shadow of himself; the thing, to him, was an entity, similar in outer appearance, yet basically as far from Kull himself as the poles are far apart. The image, it seemed to Kull, had an individuality apart from Kull's; he was no more dependent on Kull than Kull was dependent on him. And day by day Kull doubted in which world he really lived; was he the shadow, summoned at will by the other? Did he instead of the other live in a world of delusion, the shadow of the real world?

Kull began to wish that he might enter the personality beyond the mirror for a space, to see what might be seen; yet should he manage to go beyond that door could he ever return? Would he find a world identical with the one in which he moved? A world, of which his was but a ghostly reflection? Which was reality and which illusion?

At times Kull halted to wonder how such thoughts and dreams had come to enter his mind and at times he wondered if they came of his own volition or–here his thoughts would become mazed. His meditations were his own; no man ruled his thoughts and he would summon them at his pleasure; yet could he? Were they not as bats, coming and going, not at his pleasure but at the bidding or ruling of–of whom? The gods? The Women who wove the webs of Fate? Kull could come to no conclusion, for at each mental step he became more and more bewildered in a hazy gray fog of illusory assertions and refutations. This much he knew: that strange visions entered his mind, like bats flying unbidden from the whispering void of nonexistence; never had he

thought these thoughts, but now they ruled his mind, sleeping and waking, so that he seemed to walk in a daze at times; and his sleep was fraught with strange, monstrous dreams.

"Tell me, wizard," he said, sitting before the mirror, eyes fixed intently upon his image, "how can I pass yon door? For of a truth, I am not sure that that is the real world and this the shadow; at least, that which I see must exist in some form."

"See and believe," droned the wizard. "Man must believe to accomplish. Form is shadow, substance is illusion, materiality is dream; man is because he believes he is; what is man but a dream of the gods? Yet man can be that which he wishes to be; form and substance, they are but shadows. The mind, the ego, the essence of the god-dream–that is real, that is immortal. See and believe, if you would accomplish, Kull."

The king did not fully understand; he never fully understood the enigmatical utterances of the wizard, yet they struck somewhere in his being a dim responsive chord. So day after day he sat before the mirrors of Tuzun Thune. Ever the wizard lurked behind him like a shadow.

THEN came a day when Kull seemed to catch glimpses of strange lands; there flitted across his consciousness dim thoughts and recognitions. Day by day he had seemed to lose touch with the world; all things had seemed each succeeding day more ghostly and unreal; only the man in the mirror seemed like reality. Now Kull seemed to be close to the doors of some mightier worlds; giant vistas gleamed fleetingly; the fogs of unreality thinned, "form is shadow, substance is illusion; they are but shadows" sounded as if from some far country of his consciousness. He remembered the wizard's words and it seemed to him that now he almost understood–form and substance, could not he change himself at will, if he knew the master key that opened this door? What worlds within what worlds awaited the bold explorer?

The man in the mirror seemed smiling at him–closer, closer–a fog enwrapped all and the reflection dimmed suddenly–Kull knew a sensation of fading, of change, of merging–

"Kull!" the yell split the silence into a million vibratory fragments!

Mountains crashed and worlds tottered as Kull, hurled back by that frantic shout, made a superhuman effort, how or why he did not know.

A crash, and Kull stood in the room of Tuzun Thune before a shattered mirror, mazed and half blind with bewilderment. There before him lay the

body of Tuzun Thune, whose time had come at last, and above him stood Brule the Spear-slayer, sword dripping red and eyes wide with a kind of horror.

“Valka!” swore the warrior. “Kull, it was time I came!”

“Aye, yet what happened?” The king groped for words.

“Ask this traitress,” answered the Spear-slayer, indicating a girl who crouched in terror before the king; Kull saw that it was she who first sent him to Tuzun Thune. “As I came in I saw you fading into yon mirror as smoke fades into the sky, by Valka! Had I not seen I would not have believed–you had almost vanished when my shout brought you back.”

“Aye,” muttered Kull, “I had almost gone beyond the door that time.”

“This fiend wrought most craftily,” said Brule. “Kull, do you not now see how he spun and flung over you a web of magic? Kaanuub of Blaal plotted with this wizard to do away with you, and this wench, a girl of Elder Race, put the thought in your mind so that you would come here. Kananu of the council learned of the plot today; I know not what you saw in that mirror, but with it Tuzun Thune enthralled your soul and almost by his witchery he changed your body to mist–”

“Aye.” Kull was still mazed. “But being a wizard, having knowledge of all the ages and despising gold, glory and position, what could Kaanuub offer Tuzun Thune that would make of him a foul traitor?”

“Gold, power and position,” grunted Brule. “The sooner you learn that men are men whether wizard, king or thrall, the better you will rule, Kull. Now what of her?”

“Naught, Brule,” as the girl whimpered and groveled at Kull’s feet. “She was but a tool. Rise, child, and go your ways; none shall harm you.”

Alone with Brule, Kull looked for the last time on the mirrors of Tuzun Thune.

“Mayhap he plotted and conjured, Brule; nay, I doubt you not, yet–was it his witchery that was changing me to thin mist, or had I stumbled on a secret? Had you not brought me back, had I faded in dissolution or had I found worlds beyond this?”

Brule stole a glance at the mirrors, and twitched his shoulders as if he shuddered. “Aye. Tuzun Thune stored the wisdom of all the hells here. Let us begone, Kull, ere they bewitch me, too.”

“Let us go, then,” answered Kull, and side by side they went forth from the House of a Thousand Mirrors–where, mayhap, are prisoned the souls of men.

NONE look now in the mirrors of Tuzun Thune. The pleasure boats shun the shore where stands the wizard’s house and no one goes in the house or to the room where Tuzun Thune’s dried and withered carcass lies before the mirrors of illusion. The place is shunned as a place accursed, and though it stands for a thousand years to come, no footsteps shall echo there. Yet Kull upon his throne meditates often upon the strange wisdom and untold secrets hidden there and wonders….

For there are worlds beyond worlds, as Kull knows, and whether the wizard bewitched him by words or by mesmerism, vistas did open to the king’s gaze beyond that strange door, and Kull is less sure of reality since he gazed into the mirrors of Tuzun Thune.

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Thus," said Tu, chief councillor, "did Lala-ah, countess of Fanara, flee with her lover, Felgar, Farsunian adventurer, bringing shame to her husband-to-be and to the nation of Valusia."

Kull, fist supporting chin, nodded. He had listened with scant interest to the tale of how the young countess of Fanara had left a Valusian nobleman waiting on the steps of Merama's and had eloped with a man of her own choice.

"Yes," he impatiently interrupted Tu, "I understand. But what have the amorous adventures of a giddy girl to do with me? I blame her not for forsaking Kayanna–by Valka, he is as ugly as a rhinoceros and has a more abominable disposition. Then why tell me this tale?"

"You do not understand, Kull," said Tu with the patience one must accord a barbarian who happens to be a king, besides. "The customs of the nation are not your customs. Lala-ah, by deserting Ka-yanna at the very foot of the altar where their nuptials were to be consummated, committed a very gross offense to the traditions of the land–and an insult to the nation is an insult to the king, Kull. For this alone she must be brought back and punished.

"Then, she is a countess, and it is a Valusian tradition that noble women

marry foreigners only with the consent of the Valusian state–here consent was never given nor even asked. Valusia will become the scorn of all nations if we allow men from other lands to take our women with impunity."

"Name of Valka," grumbled Kull. "Here is a great to-do–custom and tradition! I have heard little else since I first pressed the throne of Valusia–in my land women mate with whom they will and with whom they choose."

"Aye, Kull." Thus Tu, soothingly. "But this is Valusia–not Atlantis. There all men, aye, and all women are free and unhindered but civilization is a network and a maze of precedences and custom. And another thing in regard to the young countess–she has a strain of royal blood."

"This man rode with Ka-yanna's horsemen in pursuit of the girl," said Tu.

"Aye," the young man spoke. "And I have for you a word from Felgar, lord king."

"A word for me? I never saw Felgar."

"Nay, but this he said to a border guard of Zarfhaana, to be repeated to they who pursued: 'Tell the barbarian swine who defiles an ancient throne, that I name him scoundrel. Tell him that some day I shall return and clothe his cowardly carcase in the clothing of women, to attend my chariot horses.'"

Kull's vast bulk heaved erect, his chair of state crashing to the floor. A moment he stood, speechless, then he found voice in a roar that sent Tu and the noble backward.

"Valka, Honen, Holgar and Hotath!" he roared, mingling deities with heathen gods in a manner that made Tu's hair rise at the blasphemy; Kull's huge arms were brandished aloft and his mighty fist descended on the table top with a force that buckled the heavy legs like paper. Tu, pale, swept off his feet by this tide of barbarian fury, backed against the wall, followed by the young noble who had dared much in giving Felgar's word. However, Kull was too much the savage to connect the insult with the bearer; it must remain for civilized rulers to wreak vengeance on courtiers.

"Horses!" roared Kull. "Have the Red Slayers mount! Send Brule to me!"

He tore off his kingly robe and hurled it across the room, snatched a costly vase from the broken table and dashed it to the floor.

"Hurry!" gasped Tu shoving the young nobleman toward the door. "Get Brule, the Pictish Spear-slayer–haste, before he slays us all!"

Tu judged the king's actions by those of preceding kings; however Kull had not progressed far enough in civilized custom to wreak his royal rage on innocent subjects.

His first red fury had been succeeded by a cold steel rage by the time Brule arrived. The Pict stalked in unconcernedly, a grim smile touching his lips as he marked the destruction caused by the king's wrath.

Kull was garbing himself in riding garments and he looked up as Brule entered, his scintillant grey eyes gleaming coldly.

“Kull, we ride?” asked the Pict.

“Aye, we ride hard and far, by Valka! We ride to Zarfhaana first and perhaps beyond–to the lands of the snow or the desert sands or to Hell! Have three hundred of the Red Slayers in readiness.”

Brule grinned in pure enjoyment. He was a powerfully built man of medium height, dark, with glittering eyes set in immobile features. He looked much like a bronze statue. Without a word he turned and left the chamber.

“Lord king, what do you do?” ventured Tu, still shaking from fright.

“I ride on Felgar’s trail,” answered the king ferociously. “The kingdom is in your hands, Tu. I return when I have crossed swords with this Farsunian or I return not at all.”

“Nay, nay!” exclaimed Tu. “This is most unwise, king! Heed not what that nameless adventurer said! The emperor of Zarfhaana will never allow you to bring such a force as you named into his realm.”

“Then I will ride over the ruins of Zarfhaana’s cities,” was Kull’s grim reply. “Men avenge their own insults in Atlantis–and though Atlantis has disowned me and I am king of Valusia–still I am a man, by Valka!”

He buckled on his great sword and strode to the door, Tu staring after him.

There before the palace sat four hundred men in their saddles. Three hundred of these were men of the Red Slayers, Kull’s cavalry, and the most terrible soldiery of the earth. They were composed mostly of Valusian hillmen, the strongest and most vigorous of a degenerating race. The remaining hundred were Picts, lean, powerful savages, men of Brule’s tribe, who sat their horses like centaurs and fought like demons when occasion arose.

All these men gave Kull the crown salute as he strode down the palace steps and his eyes lighted with a fierce gleam. He was almost grateful to Felgar for having given him the pretext he needed to quit the monotonous life of the court for awhile and plunge into fierce action–but his thoughts toward the Farsunian were no more kindly for this reason.

At the front of this fierce array sat Brule, chieftain of Valusia’s most formidable allies, and Kelkor, second commander of the Red Slayers.

Kull acknowledged the salute by a brusk gesture and swung into the saddle.

Brule and the commander reined in on either side of him.

“At attention!” came Kelkor’s curt command. “Spurs! Forward!”

The cavalcade moved forward at an easy trot. The people of Valusia gazed curiously from their windows and doorways and the throngs on the streets

turned as the clatter of silver hoofs resounded through the babble and chatter of trading and commerce. The steeds flung their caparisoned manes; the bronze armor of the warriors glinted in the sun, the pennons on the long lances streamed backward. A moment the small people of the market place stopped their gabble as the proud array swept by, blinking in stupid wonder or childish admiration; then the horsemen dwindled down the great white street, the clang of silver on cobble stone died away in the distance and the people of the city turned back to their common-place tasks. As the people always do, no matter what kings ride.

Along the broad white streets of Valusia swept the king and his horsemen, out through the suburbs with their spacious estates and lordly palaces; on and on until the golden spires and sapphire towers of Valusia were but a silver shimmer in the distance and the green hills of Zalgara loomed majestically before them.

Night found them encamped high on the slopes of the mountains. The hill people, kin to the Red Slayers, many of them, flocked to the camp with gifts of food and wine, and the warriors, the proud restraint they felt among the cities of the world loosened, talked with them and sang old songs, and exchanged old tales. But Kull walked apart, beyond the glow of the campfires to gaze out across the mystic vistas of crag and valley. The slopes were softened by verdure and foliage, the vales deepening into shadowy realms of magic, the hills standing out bold and clear in the silver of the moon. The hills of Zalgara had always held a fascination for Kull. They brought to his mind the mountains of Atlantis whose snowy heights he had scaled as a youth, ere he fared forth into the great world to write his name across the stars and make an ancient throne his seat.

Yet there was a difference. The crags of Atlantis rose stark and gaunt; her cliffs were barren and rugged. The mountains of Atlantis were brutal and terrible with youth, even as Kull. Age had not softened their might. The hills of Zalgara rose up like ancient gods but green groves and waving verdure laughed upon their shoulders and cliffs and their outline was soft and flowing. Age–age–thought Kull; many drifting centuries had worn away their craggy splendor; they were mellow and beautiful with antiquity. Ancient mountains dreaming of bygone kings whose careless feet had trod their sward.

Like a red wave the thought of Felgar’s insult swept away these broodings. Hands clenched in fury, Kull flung back his shoulders to gaze full into the calm eye of the moon.

“Helfara and Hotath doom my soul to everlasting Hell if I wreak not my vengeance on Felgar!” he snarled.

The night breeze whispered among the trees as if in answer to the heathen

vow.

Ere scarlet dawn had burst like a red rose over the hills of Zalgara Kull's cavalcade was in the saddle. The first glints of morning shone on the lance points, the helmets and the shields as the band wound its way through green waving vales and up over long undulating slopes.

"We ride into the sunrise," remarked Kelkor.

"Aye," was Brule's grim response. "And some of us ride beyond the sunrise."

Kelkor shrugged his shoulders. "So be it. That is the destiny of a warrior."

Kull glanced at the commander. Straight as a spear sat Kelkor in his saddle, inflexible, unbending as a statue of steel. The commander had always reminded the king of a fine sword of polished steel. A man of terrific power, and mighty forces, the most powerful thing about him was his absolute control of himself. An icy calmness had always characterized his words and deeds. In the heat and vituperation of council, in the wild wrack of battle, Kelkor was always cool, never confused. He had few friends, nor did he strive to make friends. His qualities alone had raised him from an unknown warrior in the ranks of the mercenaries, to the second highest rankin Valusian armies– and only the fact of his birth debarred him from the highest. For custom decreed that the lord commander of troops must be a Valusian and Kelkor was a Lemurian. Yet he looked more a Valusian than a Lemurian as he sat his horse, for he was built differently from most of his race, being tall and leanly but strongly built. His strange eyes alone betrayed his race.

Another dawn found them riding down from the foothills that debouched out into the Camoonian desert, a vast wasteland, uninhabited, a dreary waste of yellow sands. No trees grew there, nor even bushes, nor were there any

streams of water. All day they rode, stopping only a short time at midday to eat and rest the horses, though the heat was almost intolerable. The men, enured as they were, wilted beneath the heat. Silence reigned save for the clank of stirrups and armor, the creak of sweating saddles, and the monotonous scruff of hoof through the deep sands. Even Brule hung his corselet on his saddle bow. But Kelkor sat upright and unmoved, under the weight of full armor, seemingly untouched by the heat and discomfort that harried the rest.

“Steel, all steel,” thought Kull in admiration, secretly wondering if he could ever attain the perfect mastery over himself that this man, also a barbarian, had attained.

Two days’ journey brought them out of the desert and into the low hills that marked the confines of Zarfhaana. At the border line they were stopped by two Zarfhaana’an riders.

“I am Kull, of Valusia,” the king answered abruptly. “I ride on the trail of Felgar. Seek not to hinder my passing. I will be responsible to your emperor.”

The two horsemen reined aside to let the cavalcade pass and as the clashing hoofs faded in the distance, one spoke to the other:

“I win our wager. The king of Valusia rides himself.”

“Aye,” the other replied. “These barbarians avenge their own wrongs. Had the king been a Valusian, by Valka, you had lost.”

The vales of Zarfhaana echoed to the tramp of Kull’s riders. The peaceful country people flocked out of their villages to watch the fierce war-men sweep by and word went to the north and the south, the west and the east, that Kull of Valusia rode eastward.

Just beyond the frontier, Kull, having sent an envoy to the Zarfhaana’an

emperor to assure him of their peaceful intention, held council with Brule, Ka-yanna and Kelkor.

“They have the start of us by many days,” said Kull, “and we must lose no time in searching for their trail. These country people will lie to us; we must scent out our own trail, as wolves scent out the spoor of a deer.”

“Let me question these fellows,” said Ka-yanna, with a vicious curl of his thick, sensual lips. “I will guarantee to make them speak truthfully.”

Kull glanced at him inquiringly.

“There are ways,” purred the Valusian.

“Torture?” grunted Kull, his lips writhing in unveiled contempt. “Zarfhaana is a friendly nation.”

“What cares the emperor for a few wretched villagers?” blandly asked Ka-yanna.

“Enough.” Kull swept aside the suggestion with true Atlantean abhorrence, but Brule raised his hand for attention.

“Kull,” said he, “I like this fellow’s plan no more than you but at times even a swine speaks truth–” Ka-yanna’s lips writhed in rage but the Pict gave him no heed. “Let me take a few of my men among the villages and question

them. I will only frighten a few, harming no one; otherwise we may spend weeks in futile search."

"There spake the barbarian," said Kull with the friendly maliciousness that existed between the two.

"In what city of the Seven Empires were you born, lord king?" asked the Pict with sarcastic deference.

Kelkor dismissed this by-play with an impatient wave of his hand.

"Here is our position," said he, scrawling a map in the ashes of the camp-fire with his scabbard end. "North, Felgar is not likely to go–assuming as we do that he does not intend remaining in Zarfhaana–because beyond Zarfhaana is the sea, swarming with pirates and sea-rovers. South he will not go because there lies Thurania, foe of his nation. Now it is my guess that he will strike straight east as he was travelling, cross Zarfhaana's eastern border somewhere near the frontier city of Talunia, and go into the wastelands of Grondar; thence I believe he will turn south seeking to gain Farsun–which lies west of Valusia–through the small principalities south of Thurania."

"Here is much supposition, Kelkor," said Kull. "If Felgar wishes to win through to Farsun, why in Valka's name did he strike in the exactly opposite direction?"

"Because, as you know Kull, in these unsettled times all our borders except the eastern-most are closely guarded. He could never have gotten through without proper explanation, much less have carried the countess with him."

"I believe Kelkor is right, Kull," said Brule, eyes dancing with impatience to be in the saddle. "His arguments sound logical, at any rate."

"As good a plan as any," replied Kull. "We ride east."

And east they rode through the long lazy days, entertained and feasted at every halt by the kindly Zarfhaana'an people. A soft and lazy land, thought Kull, a dainty girl, waiting helpless for some ruthless conqueror–Kull

dreamed his dreams as his riders' hoofs beat out their tattoo through the dreamy valleys and the verdant woodlands. Yet he drove his men hard, giving them no rest, for ever behind his far-sweeping and imperial visions of blood-stained glory and wild conquest, there loomed the phantom of his hate, the relentless hatred of the savage, before which all else must give way.

They swung wide of cities and large towns for Kull wished not to give his fierce warriors opportunity to become embroiled with some dispute with the inhabitants. The cavalcade was nearing the border city of Talunia, Zarfhaana's last eastern outpost, when the envoy sent to the emperor in his city to the north rejoined them with the word that the emperor was quite willing that Kull should ride through his land, and requested the Valusian king to visit him on his return. Kull smiled grimly at the irony of the situation, considering the fact that even while the emperor was giving benevolent permission, Kull was already far into his country with his men.

Kull's warriors rode into Talunia at dawn, after an all night's ride, for he had thought that perhaps Felgar and the countess, feeling temporarily safe, would tarry awhile in the border city and he wished to precede the word of his coming.

Kull encamped his men some distance outside the city walls and entered the city alone save for Brule. The gates were readily opened to him when he had shown the regal signet of Valusia and the symbol sent him by the Zarfhaana'an emperor.

"Hark ye," said Kull to the commander of the gate-guards. "Are Felgar and Lala-ah in this city?"

"That I cannot say," the soldier answered. "They entered at this gate many days since but whether they are still in the city or not, I do not know."

"Listen, then," said Kull, slipping a gemmed bracelet from his mighty arm. "I am merely a wandering Valusian noble, accompanied by a Pictish companion. None need to know who I am, understand?"

The soldier eyed the costly ornament covetously. "Very good, lord king, but what of your soldiers encamped in the forest?"

"They are concealed from the eyes of the city. If any peasant enters your gate, question him and if he tells you of a force encamped, hold him prisoner for some trumped-up reason, until this time tomorrow. For by then I shall have secured the information I desire."

"Valka's name, lord king, you would make me a traitor of sorts!" expostulated the soldier. "I think not that you plan treachery, yet–"

Kull changed his tactics. "Have you not orders to obey your emperor's command? Have I not shown you his symbol of command? Dare you disobey? Valka, it is you who would be the traitor!"

After all, reflected the soldier, this was the truth–he would not be bribed, no! no! But since it was the order of a king who bore authority from his emperor–

Kull handed over the bracelet with no more than a faint smile betraying his contempt of mankind's way of lulling their conscience into the path of their desire; refusing to admit that they violated their own moral senses, even to themselves.

The king and Brule walked through the streets, where the trades-people were just beginning to stir. Kull's giant stature and Brule's bronze skin drew many curious stares, but no more than would be expected to be accorded strangers. Kull began to wish he had brought Kelkor or a Valusian for Brule could not possibly disguise his race, and since Picts were seldom seen in these eastern cities, it might cause comment that would reach the hearing of those they sought.

They sought a modest tavern where they secured a room, then took their seats in the drinking room, to see if they might hear aught of what they wished to hear. But the day wore on and nothing was said of the fugitive couple nor did carefully veiled questions elicit any knowledge. If Felgar and Lala-ah were still in Talunia they were certainly not advertising their presence. Kull would have thought that the presence of a dashing gallant and a beautiful young girl of royal blood in the city would have been the subject of at least some comment, but such seemed not to be the case.

Kull intended to fare forth that night upon the streets, even to the extent of committing some marauding if necessary, and failing in this to reveal his identity to the lord of the city the next morning demanding that the culprits by handed over to him. Yet Kull's ferocious pride rebelled at such an act. This

seemed the most logical course, and was one which Kull would have followed had the matter been merely a diplomatic or political one. But Kull's fierce pride was roused and he was loath to ask aid from anyone in the consummating of his vengeance.

Night was falling as the comrades stepped into the streets, still thronged with voluble people and lighted by torches set along the streets. They were passing a shadowy side-street when a cautious voice halted them. From the dimness between the great buildings a claw-like hand beckoned. With a swift glance at each other, they stepped forward, warily loosening their daggers in their sheaths as they did so.

An aged crone, ragged, stooped with age, stole from the shadows.

"Aye, king Kull, what seek ye in Talunia?" her voice was a shrill whisper.

Kull's fingers closed about his dagger hilt more firmly as he replied guardedly.

"How know you my name?"

"The market-places speak and hear," she answered with a low cackle of unhallowed mirth. "A man saw and recognized you today in the tavern and the word has gone from mouth to mouth."

Kull cursed softly.

"Hark ye!" hissed the woman. "I can lead ye to those ye seek–if ye be willing to pay the price."

"I will fill your apron with gold," Kull answered swiftly.

"Good. Listen now. Felgar and the countess are apprized of your arrival. Even now they are preparing their escape. They have hidden in a certain house since early evening when they learned that you had come, and soon they leave their hiding place–"

"How can they leave the city?" interrupted Kull. "The gates are shut at

sunset.”

“Horses await them at a postern gate in the eastern wall. The guard there has been bribed. Felgar has many friends in Talunia.”

“Where hide they now?”

The crone stretched forth a shrivelled hand. “A token of good faith, lord king,” she wheedled.

Kull put a coin in her hand and she smirked and made a grotesque curtesy.

“Follow me, lord king,” and she hobbled away swiftly into the shadows.

The king and his companion followed her uncertainly, through narrow, winding streets until she halted before an unlit huge building in a squalid part of the city.

“They hide in a room at the head of the stairs leading from the lower chamber opening into the street, lord king.”

“How do you know that they do?” asked Kull suspiciously. “Why should they pick such a wretched place in which to hide?”

The woman laughed silently, rocking to and fro in her uncanny mirth.

“As soon as I made sure you were in Talunia, lord king, I hurried to the mansion where they had their abode and told them, offering to lead them to a place of concealment! Ho ho ho! They paid me good gold coins!”

Kull stared at her silently.

“Now by Valka,” said he, “I knew not civilization could produce a thing like this woman. Here, female, guide Brule to the gate where await the horses–Brule, go with her there and await my coming–perchance Felgar might give me the slip here–”

“But Kull,” protested Brule, “you go not into yon dark house alone–bethink you this might all be an ambush!”

“This woman dare not betray me!” and the crone shuddered at the grim response. “Haste ye!”

As the two forms melted into the darkness, Kull entered the house. Groping with his hands until his feline-gifted eyes became accustomed to the total darkness he found the stair and ascended it, dagger in hand, walking stealthily and on the look out for creaking steps. For all his size, the king moved as easily and silently as a leopard and had the watcher at the head of the stairs been awake it is doubtful he would have heard his coming.

As it was, he awakened when Kull's hand was clapped over his mouth, only to fall back temporarily unconscious as Kull's fist found his jaw.

The king crouched a moment above his victim, straining his faculties for any sound that might betoken that he had been heard. Utter silence reigned. He stole to the door. Ah, his keen senses detected a low confused mumble as of people whispering–a guarded movement–with one leap Kull hurled the door open and hurled himself into the room. He halted not to weigh chances–there might have been a roomful of assassins waiting for him for all he thought of the thing.

Everything then happened in an instant. Kull saw a barren room, lighted by moonlight that streamed in at the window, he caught a glimpse of two forms clambering through this window, one apparently carrying the other, a fleeting glance of a pair of dark, daring eyes in a face of piquant beauty, another laughing, reckless handsome face–all this he saw confusedly as he cleared the whole room with a tigerish bound, a roar of pure bestial ferocity breaking from his lips at the sight of his foe escaping. The window was empty even as he hurled across the sill, and raging and furious, he caught another glimpse, two forms darting into the shadows of a near by maze of buildings–a silvery mocking laugh floated back to him, another stronger, more mocking. Kull flung a leg over the sill and dropped the sheer thirty feet to the earth, disdaining the rope ladder that still swung from the window. He could not hope to follow them through that maze of streets, which they doubtless knew much better than he.

Sure of their destination, however, he raced toward the gate in the eastern wall, which from the crone's description was not far distant. However some time elapsed before he arrived and when he did it was only to find Brule and the hag there.

"Nay," said Brule, "the horses are here but none has come for them."

Kull cursed savagely. Felgar had tricked him after all and the woman also.

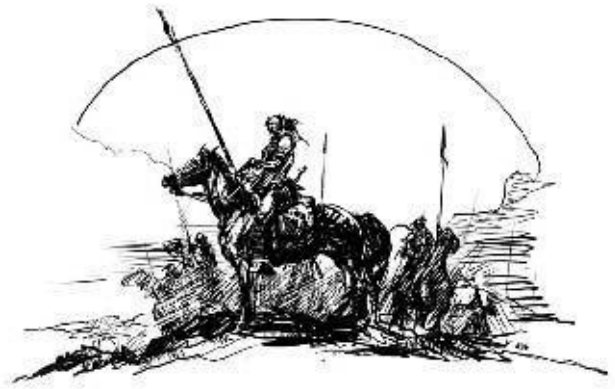
Suspecting treachery, the horses at that gate had only served as a blind. Felgar was doubtless escaping through some other gate, then.

“Swift!” shouted Kull. “Haste to the camp and have the men mount! I follow Felgar’s trail.”

And leaping upon one of the horses he was gone. Brule mounted the other and rode toward the camp. The crone watched them go, shaking with unholy mirth. After a while she heard the drum of many hoofs passing the city.

“Ho ho ho! They ride into the sunrise–and who rides back from beyond the sunrise?”

All night Kull rode, striving to cut down the lead the Farsunian and the girl had gained. He knew they dared not remain in Zarfhaana and as the sea lay to the north and Thurania, Farsun’s ancient enemy, to the south, then there lay but one course for them–the road to Grondar.



The stars were paling when the ramparts of the eastern hills rose starkly against the sky in front of the king, and dawn was stealing over the grasslands as Kull’s weary steed toiled up the pass and halted a moment at the summit. Here the fugitives must have passed for these cliffs stretched the whole length of the Zarfhaana’an border and the next nearest pass was many a mile to the north. The Zarfhaana’an in the small tower that reared up in the pass hailed the king, but Kull replied with a gesture and rode on.

At the crest of the pass he halted. There beyond lay Grondar. The cliffs rose as abruptly on the eastern side as they did upon the west and from their feet the grass lands stretched away endlessly. Mile upon countless mile of tall waving savannah land met his eyes, seemingly inhabited only by the herds of buffalo and deer that roamed those wild expanses. The east was fast reddening and as Kull sat his horse the sun flamed up over the savannahs like a wild blaze of fire, making it appear to the king as if all the grass lands were ablaze–limning the motionless horseman against its flame, so that man and horse seemed a single dark statue against the red morning, to the riders who

were just entering the first defiles of the pass far behind. Then he vanished to their gaze as he spurred forward.

"He rides into the sunrise," muttered the warriors.

"Who rides back from the sunrise?"

The sun was high in the sky when the troop overtook Kull, the king having stopped to consult with his companions.

"Have your Picts spread out," said Kull. "Felgar and the countess will try to turn south any time now, for no man dares to ride any further into Grondar than need be. They might even seek to get past us and win back into Zarfhaana."

So they rode in open formation, Brule's Picts ranging like lean wolves far afield to the north and the south.

But the fugitives' trail led straight onward, Kull's trained eyes easily following the course through the tall grass, marking where the grass had been trampled and beaten down by the horses' hoofs. Evidently the countess and her lover rode alone.

And on into the wild country of Grondar they rode, pursuers and pursued.

How Felgar managed to keep that lead, Kull could not understand, but the soldiers were forced to spare their horses, while Felgar had extra steeds and could change from one to another, thus keeping each comparatively fresh.

Kull had sent no envoy to the king of Grondar. The Grondarians were a wild half civilized race, of whom little was known by the rest of the world, save that their raiding parties sometimes swept out of the grass lands to sweep the borders of Thurania and the lesser nations with torch and sword. Westward their borders were plainly marked, clearly defined and carefully guarded, that is by their neighbors, but how far easterly their kingdom extended no one knew. It was vaguely supposed that their country extended to and possibly included that vast expanse of untenable wilderness spoken of in myth and legend as The World's End.

Several days of hard riding had passed with neither sight of the fugitives or any other human, when a Pictish rider sighted a band of horsemen approaching from the south.

Kull halted his force and waited. There rode up and halted at a distance a band of some four hundred Grondarian warriors, fierce, leanly built men, clad in leather garments and rude armor.

Their leader rode forth. "Stranger, what do ye in this land?"

Kull answered, "We pursue a disobedient subject and her lover and we ride in peace. We have no dispute with Grondar."

The Grondarian sneered. "Men who ride in Grondar carry their lives in their right hands, stranger."

“Then by Valka,” roared Kull, losing patience, “my right hand is stronger to defend than all Grondar is to assail! Stand aside ere we trample you!”

“Lances at rest!” came Kelkor’s curt voice; the forest of spears lowered as one, the warriors leaning forward.

The Grondarians gave back before that formidable array, unable, as they knew, to stand in the open the charge of fully armed horsemen. They reined aside, sitting their horses sullenly as the Valusians swept by them. The leader shouted after them.

“Ride on, fools! Who ride beyond the sunrise–return not!”

They rode, and though bands of horsemen circled their tracks, at a distance like hawks, and they kept a heavy guard at night, the riders came not nearer nor were the outriders molested in any way.

The grass lands continued with never a hill or forest to break their monotony. Sometimes they came upon the almost obliterated ruins of some ancient city, mute reminders of the bloody days when, ages and ages since, the ancestors of the Grondarians had appeared from nowhere in particular and had conquered the original inhabitants of the land. They sighted no inhabited cities, none of the rough habitations of the Grondarians, for their way led through an especially wild, unfrequented part of the land. It became evident that Felgar intended not to turn back; his trail led straight east and whether he hoped to find sanctuary somewhere in that nameless land or whether he was seeking merely to tire his pursuers out, could not be said.

Long days of riding and then they came to a great river meandering through the plain. At its banks the grass lands came to an abrupt halt and beyond, on the further side, a barren desert stretched to the horizon.

An ancient man stood upon the bank and a large, flat boat floated on the sullen surface of the water. The man was aged but mightily built, as huge as Kull himself. He was clad only in ragged garments, seemingly as ancient as himself but there was something kingly and awe-inspiring about the man. His snowy hair fell to his shoulders and his huge white beard, wild and unkempt, came almost to his waist. From beneath white, lowering brows, great luminous eyes blazed, undimmed by age.

“Stranger, who have the bearing of a king,” said he to Kull, in a great deep resonant voice, “would ye cross the river?”

“Aye,” said Kull, “if they we seek crossed.”

“A man and a girl rode my ferry yesterday at dawn,” was the answer.

“Name of Valka!” swore Kull, “I could find it in me to admire the fool’s courage! What city lies beyond this river, ferryman?”

“No city lies beyond,” said the elder man. “This river marks the border of Grondar–and the world!”

“How!” ejaculated Kull. “Have we ridden so far? I had thought that the-desert-which-is-the-end-of-the-world was part of Grondar’s realm.”

“Nay. Grondar ends here. Here is the end of the world; beyond is magic and the unknown. Here is the boundary of the world; there begins the realm of horror and mysticism. This is the river Stagus and I am Karon the Ferryman.”

Kull looked at him in wonder, little knowing that he gazed upon one who should go down the dim centuries until myth and legend had changed the truth and Karon the ferryman had become the boatman of Hades.

“You are very aged,” said Kull curiously, while the Valusians looked on the man with wonder and the savage Picts in superstitious awe.

“Aye. I am a man of the Elder Race, who ruled the world before Valusia was, or Grondar or Zarfhaana, riders from the sunset. Ye would cross this river? Many a warrior, many a king have I ferried across. Remember, they who ride beyond the sun-rise, return not! For of all the thousands who have crossed the Stagus, not one has returned. Three hundred years have passed since first I saw the light, king of Valusia. I ferried the army of King Gaar the Conqueror when he rode into World’s End with all his mighty hosts. Seven days they were passing over yet no man of them came back. Aye, the sound of battle, the clash of swords clanged out over the waste lands for a long while from sun to sun, but when the moon shone all was silence. Mark this, Kull, no man has ever returned from beyond the Stagus. Nameless horrors lurk in yonder lands and terrible are the ghastly shapes of doom I glimpse beyond the river in the vagueness of dusk and the grey of early dawn. Mark ye, Kull.”

Kull turned in his saddle and eyed his men.

“Here my commands cease,” said he. “As for myself I ride on Felgar’s trail if it lead to Hell and beyond. Yet I bid no man follow beyond this river. Ye all have my permission to return to Valusia, nor shall any word of blame ever be spoken of you.”

Brule reined to Kull’s side.

“I ride with the king,” he said curtly and his Picts raised an acquiescing shout. Kelkor rode forward.

“They who would return, take a single pace forward,” said he.

The metal ranks sat motionless as statue.

“They ride, Kull,” grinned Brule.

A fierce pride rose in the king’s savage soul. He spoke a single sentence, a sentence which thrilled his warriors more than an accolade.

“Ye are men.”

Karon ferried them across, rowing over and returning until the entire force stood on the eastern bank. And though the boat was heavy and the ancient man rowed alone, yet his clumsy oars drove the unwieldy craft swiftly through the water and at the last journey he was no more weary than at the start.

Kull spake. “Since the desert throngs with wild things, how is it that none come into the lands of men?”

Karon pointed to the river and looking closely Kull saw that the river swarmed with serpents and small fresh water sharks.

“No man swims this river,” said the ferryman. “Neither man nor mammoth.”

“Forward,” said Kull. “Forward; we ride. The land is free before us.”

The Cat and the Skull

The Cat and the Skull

King Kull went with Tu, chief councillor of the throne, to see the talking cat of Delcardes, for though a cat may look at a king, it is not given every king to look at a cat like Delcardes'. So Kull forgot the death-threat of Thulsa Doom the necromancer and went to Delcardes.

Kull was skeptical and Tu was wary and suspicious without knowing why, but years of counter-plot and intrigue had soured him. He swore testily that a talking cat was a snare and a fraud, a swindle and a delusion and maintained that should such a thing exist, it was a direct insult to the gods, who ordained that only man should enjoy the power of speech.

But Kull knew that in the old times beasts had talked to men for he had heard the legends, handed down from his barbarian ancestors. So he was skeptical but open to conviction.

Delcardes helped the conviction. She lounged with supple ease upon her silk couch, herself like a great beautiful feline, and looked at Kull from under long drooping lashes, which lended unimaginable charm to her narrow, piquantly slanted eyes.

Her lips were full and red and usually, as at present, curved in a faint enigmatical smile and her silken garments and ornaments of gold and gems hid little of her glorious figure.

But Kull was not interested in women. He ruled Valusia but for all that he was an Atlantean and a ferocious savage in the eyes of his subjects. War and conquest held his attention, together with keeping his feet on the ever rocking throne of the ancient empire, and the task of learning the ways, customs and thoughts of the people he ruled–and the threats of Thulsa Doom.

To Kull, Delcardes was a mysterious and queenly figure, alluring, yet surrounded by a haze of ancient wisdom and womanly magic.

To Tu, chief councillor, she was a woman and therefore the latent base of intrigue and danger.

To Ka-nu, Pictish ambassador and Kull’s closest adviser, she was an eager child, parading under the effect of her show-acting; but Ka-nu was not there when Kull came to see the talking cat.

The cat lolled on a silken cushion, on a couch of her own and surveyed the king with inscrutable eyes. Her name was Saremes and she had a slave who stood behind her, ready to do her bidding, a lanky man who kept the lower part of his face half concealed by a thin veil which fell to his chest.

“King Kull,” said Delcardes, “I crave a boon of you–before Saremes begins to speak–when I must be silent.”

“You may speak,” Kull answered.

The girl smiled eagerly, and clasped her hands.

“Let me marry Kulra Thoom of Zarfhaana!”

Tu broke in as Kull was about to speak.

“My lord, this matter has been thrashed out at lengths before! I thought there was some purpose in requesting this visit! This–this girl has a strain of royal blood in her and it is against the custom of Valusia that royal women should marry foreigners of lower rank.”

“But the king can rule otherwise,” pouted Delcardes.

“My lord,” said Tu, spreading his hands as one in the last stages of nervous irritation, “if she marries thus it is like to cause war and rebellion and discord for the next hundred years.”

He was about to plunge into a dissertation on rank, genealogy and history but Kull interrupted, his short stock of patience exhausted:

“Valka and Hotath! Am I an old woman or a priest to be bedevilled with such affairs? Settle it between yourselves and vex me no more with questions of mating! By Valka, in Atlantis men and women marry whom they please and none else.”

Delcardes pouted a little, made a face at Tu who scowled back, then smiled sunnily and turned on her couch with a lissome movement.

“Talk to Saremes, Kull, she will grow jealous of me.”

Kull eyed the cat uncertainly. Her fur was long, silky and grey, her eyes slanting and mysterious.

“She is very young, Kull, yet she is very old,” said Delcardes. “She is a cat of the Old Race who lived to be thousands of years old. Ask her her age, Kull.”

“How many years have you seen, Saremes?” asked Kull idly.

“Valusia was young when I was old,” the cat answered in a clear though curiously timbred voice.

Kull started violently.

“Valka and Hotath!” he swore. “She talks!”

Delcardes laughed softly in pure enjoyment but the expression of the cat never altered.

“I talk, I think, I know, *I am*,” she said. “I have been the ally of queens and the councillor of kings ages before even the white beaches of Atlantis knew your feet, Kull of Valusia. I saw the ancestors of the Valusians ride out of the far east to trample down the Old Race and I was here when the Old Race came up out of the oceans so many eons ago that the mind of man reels when seeking to measure them. Older am I than Thulsa Doom, whom few men have

ever seen.

“I have seen empires rise and kingdoms fall and kings ride in on their steeds and out on their shields. Aye, I have been a goddess in my time and strange were the neophytes who bowed before me and terrible were the rites which were performed in my worship to pleasure me. For of eld beings exalted my kind; beings as strange as their deeds.”

“Can you read the stars and foretell events?” Kull’s barbarian mind leaped at once to material ideas.

“Aye; the books of the past and the future are open to me and I tell man what is good for him to know.”

“Then tell me,” said Kull, “where I misplaced the secret letter from Kanu yesterday.”

“You thrust it into the bottom of your dagger scabbard and then instantly forgot it,” the cat replied.

Kull started, snatched out his dagger and shook the sheath. A thin strip of folded parchment tumbled out.

“Valka and Hotath!” he swore. “Saremes, you are a witch of cats! Mark ye, Tu!”

But Tu’s lips were pressed in a straight disapproving line and he eyed Delcardes darkly.

She returned his stare guilelessly and he turned to Kull in irritation.

“My lord, consider! This is all mummery of some sort.”

“Tu, none saw me hide that letter for I myself had forgotten.”

“Lord king, any spy might–”

“Spy? Be not a greater fool than you were born, Tu. Shall a cat set spies to watch me hide letters?”

Tu sighed. As he grew older it was becoming increasingly difficult to

refrain from showing exasperation toward kings.

“My lord, give thought to the humans who may be behind the cat!”

“Lord Tu,” said Delcardes in a tone of gentle reproach, “you put me to shame and you offend Saremes.”

Kull felt vaguely angered at Tu.

“At least, Tu,” said he, “the cat talks; that you cannot deny.”

“There is some trickery,” Tu stubbornly maintained. “Man talks; beasts may not.”

“Not so,” said Kull, himself convinced of the reality of the talking cat and anxious to prove the rightness of his belief. “A lion talked to Kambra and birds have spoken to the old men of the sea-mountain tribes, telling them where game was hidden.

“None denies that beasts talk among themselves. Many a night have I lain on the slopes of the forest covered hills or out on the grassy savannahs and have heard the tigers roaring to one another across the star-light. Then why should some beast not learn the speech of man? There have been times when I could almost understand the roaring of the tigers. The tiger is my totem and is tambu to me save in self defense,” he added irrelevantly.

Tu squirmed. This talk of totem and tambu was good enough in a savage chief, but to hear such remarks from the king of Valusia irked him extremely.

“My lord,” said he, “a cat is not a tiger.”

“Very true,” said Kull, “and this one is wiser than all tigers.”

“That is naught but truth,” said Saremes calmly.

“Lord Chancellor, would you believe then, if I told you what was at this moment transpiring at the royal treasury?”

“No!” Tu snarled. “Clever spies may learn anything as I have found.”

“No man can be convinced when he will not,” said Saremes imperturbably, quoting a very old Valusian saying. “Yet know, lord Tu, that a surplus of twenty gold tals has been discovered and a courier is even now hastening through the streets to tell you of it. Ah,” as a step sounded in the corridor without, “even now he comes.”

A slim courtier, clad in the gay garments of the royal treasury, entered, bowing deeply, and craved permission to speak. Kull having granted it, he said:

“Mighty king and lord Tu, a surplus of twenty tals of gold has been found in the royal monies.”

Delcardes laughed and clapped her hands delightedly but Tu merely scowled.

“When was this discovered?”

“A scant half hour ago.”

“How many have been told of it?”

“None, my lord. Only I and the Royal Treasurer have known until just now when I told you, my lord.”

“Humph!” Tu waved him aside sourly. “Begone. I will see about this matter later.”

“Delcardes,” said Kull, “this cat is yours, is she not?”

“Lord king,” answered the girl, “no one owns Saremes. She only bestows on me the honor of her presence; she is a guest. As for the rest she is her own mistress and has been for a thousand years.”

“I would that I might keep her in the palace,” said Kull.

“Saremes,” said Delcardes deferentially, “the king would have you as his guest.”

“I will go with the king of Valusia,” said the cat with dignity, “and remain in the royal palace until such time as it shall pleasure me to go elsewhere. For I am a great traveller, Kull, and it pleases me at times to go out over the world-path and walk the streets of cities where in ages gone I have roamed forests, and to tread the sands of deserts where long ago I trod imperial streets.”

So Saremes the talking cat came to the royal palace of Valusia. Her slave accompanied her and she was given a spacious chamber, lined with fine couches and silken pillows. The best viands of the royal table were placed before her daily and all the household of the king did homage to her except Tu who grumbled to see a cat exalted, even a talking cat. Saremes treated him with amused contempt but admitted Kull into a level of dignified equality.

She quite often came into his throne chamber, borne on a silken cushion by her slave who must always accompany her, no matter where she went.

At other times Kull came into her chamber and they talked into the dim hours of dawn and many were the tales she told him and ancient the wisdom that she imparted. Kull listened with interest and attention for it was evident that this cat was wiser far than many of his councillors, and had gained more antique wisdom than all of them together. Her words were pithy and oracular and she refused to prophesy beyond minor affairs taking place in the every day life of the palace, and kingdom, save that she warned him against Thulsa Doom who had sent a threat to Kull.

"For," said she, "I who have lived more years than you shall live minutes, know that man is better without knowledge of things to come, for what is to be will be, and man can neither avert not hasten. It is better to go in the dark when the road must pass a lion and there is no other road."

"Yet," said Kull, "if what must be is to be–a thing which I doubt–and a man be told what things shall come to pass and his arm weakened or strengthened thereby, then was not that too, foreordained?"

"If he was ordained to be told," said Saremes, adding to Kull's perplexity and doubt. "However, not all of life's roads are set fast, for a man may do this or a man may do that and not even the gods know the mind of a man."

"Then," said Kull dubiously, "all things are not destined, if there be more than one road for a man to follow. And how can events then be prophesied truly?"

"Life has many roads, Kull," answered Saremes. "I stand at the cross-roads of the world and I know what lies down each road. Still, not even the gods know what road a man will take, whether the right hand or the left hand, when he comes to the dividing of the ways, and once started upon a road he cannot retrace his steps."

"Then, in Valka's name," said Kull, "why not point out to me the perils or the advantages of each road as it comes and aid me in choosing?"

"Because there are bounds set upon the powers of such as I," the cat replied, "lest we hinder the workings of the alchemy of the gods. We may not brush the veil entirely aside for human eyes, lest the gods take our power from us and lest we do harm to man. For though there are many roads at each cross-roads, still a man must take one of those and sometimes one is no better than another. So Hope flickers her lamp along one road and man follows, though that road may be the foulest of all."

Then she continued, seeing Kull found it difficult to understand.

"You see, lord king, that our powers must have limits, else we might grow too powerful and threaten the gods. So a mystic spell is laid upon us and

while we may open the books of the past, we may but grant flying glances of the future, through the mist that veils it."

Kull felt somehow that the argument of Saremes was rather flimsy and illogical, smacking of witch-craft and mummery, but with Saremes' cold, oblique eyes gazing unwinkingly at him, he was not prone to offer any objections, even had he thought of any.

"Now," said the cat, "I will draw aside the veil for an instant to your own good–let Delcardes marry Kulra Thoom."

Kull rose with an impatient twitch of his mighty shoulders.

"I will have naught to do with a woman's mating. Let Tu attend to it."

Yet Kull slept on the thought and as Saremes wove the advice craftily into her philosophizing and moralizing in days to come, Kull weakened.

A strange sight it was, indeed, to see Kull, his chin resting on his great fist, leaning forward and drinking in the distinct intonations of the cat Saremes as she lay curled on her silken cushion, or stretched languidly at full length–as she talked of mysterious and fascinating subjects, her eyes glinting strangely and her lips scarcely moving, or not at all, while the slave Kuthulos stood behind her like a statue, motionless and speechless.

Kull highly valued her opinions and he was prone to ask her advice–which she gave warily or not at all–on matters of state. Still, Kull found that what she advised usually coincided with his private wishes and he began to wonder if she were not a mind reader also.

Kuthulos irked him with his gauntness, his motionlessness and his silence but Saremes would have none other to attend her. Kull strove to pierce the veil that masked the man's features, but though it seemed thin enough, he could tell nothing of the face beneath and out of courtesy to Saremes, never asked Kuthulos to unveil.

Kull came to the chamber of Saremes one day and she looked at him with enigmatical eyes. The masked slave stood statue like behind her.

“Kull,” said she, “again I will tear the veil for you; Brule, the Pictish Spear-slayer, warrior of Ka-nu and your friend, has just been haled beneath the surface of the Forbidden Lake by a grisly monster.”

Kull sprang up, cursing in rage and alarm.

“Ha, Brule? Valka’s name, what was he doing about the Forbidden Lake?”

“He was swimming there. Hasten, you may yet save him, even though he be borne to the Enchanted Land which lies below the Lake.”

Kull whirled toward the door. He was startled but not so much as he would have been had the swimmer been someone else, for he knew the reckless irreverence of the Pict, chief among Valusia’s most powerful allies.

He started to shout for guards when Saremes’ voice stayed him:

“Nay, my lord. You had best go alone. Not even your command might make men accompany you into the waters of that grim lake and by the custom of Valusia, it is death for any man to enter there save the king.”

“Aye, I will go alone,” said Kull, “and thus save Brule from the anger of the people, should he chance to escape the monsters; inform Ka-nu!”

Kull, discouraging respectful inquiries with wordless snarls, mounted his great stallion and rode out of Valusia at full speed. He rode alone and he ordered none to follow him. That which he had to do, he could do alone, and he did not wish anyone to see when he brought Brule or Brule’s corpse out of the Forbidden Lake. He cursed the reckless inconsideration of the Pict and he cursed the tambu which hung over the Lake, the violation of which might cause rebellion among the Valusians.

Twilight was stealing down from the mountains of Zalgara when Kull halted his horse on the shores of the lake that lay amid a great lonely forest. There was certainly nothing forbidding in its appearance, for its waters spread blue and placid from beach to wide white beach and the tiny islands rising above its bosom seemed like gems of emerald and jade. A faint shimmering mist rose from it, enhancing the air of lazy unreality which lay about the regions of the lake. Kull listened intently for a moment and it seemed to him as though faint and far away music breathed up through the sapphire waters.

He cursed impatiently, wondering if he were beginning to be bewitched, and flung aside all garments and ornaments except his girdle, loin clout and sword. He waded out into the shimmery blueness until it lapped his thighs, then knowing that the depth swiftly increased, he drew a deep breath and dived.

As he swam down through the sapphire glimmer, he had time to reflect that this was probably a fool's errand. He might have taken time to find from Saremes just where Brule had been swimming when attacked and whether he was destined to rescue the warrior or not. Still, he thought that the cat might not have told him, and even if she had assured him of failure, he would have attempted what he was now doing, anyway. So there was truth in Saremes' saying that men were better untold then.

As for the location of the lake-battle, the monster might have dragged Brule anywhere. He intended to explore the lake bed until–

Even as he ruminated thus, a shadow flashed by him, a vague shimmer in the jade and sapphire shimmer of the lake. He was aware that other shadows swept by him on all sides, but he could not make out their form.

Far beneath him he began to see the glimmer of the lake bottom which

seemed to glow with a strange radiance. Now the shadows were all about him; they wove a serpentine about and in front of him, an ever-changing thousand-hued glittering web of color. The water here burned topaz and the things wavered and scintillated in its faery splendor. Like the shades and shadows of colors they were, vague and unreal, yet opaque and gleaming.

However, Kull, deciding that they had no intention of attacking him, gave them no more attention but directed his gaze on the lake floor, which his feet just then struck, lightly. He started, and could have sworn that he had landed on a living creature for he felt a rhythmic movement beneath his bare feet. The faint glow was evident there at the bottom of the lake–as far as he could see stretching away on all sides until it faded into the lambent sapphire shadows, the lake floor was one solid level of fire, that faded and glowed with unceasing regularity. Kull bent closer–the floor was covered by a sort of short moss-like substance which shone like white flame. It was as if the lake bed were covered with myriads of fire-flies which raised and lowered their wings together. And this moss throbbed beneath his feet like a living thing.

Now Kull began to swim upward again. Raised among the sea-mountains of ocean-girt Atlantis, he was like a sea-creature himself. As much at home in the water as any Lemurian, he could remain under the surface twice as long as the ordinary swimmer, but this lake was deep and he wished to conserve his strength.

He came to the top, filled his enormous chest with air and dived again. Again the shadows swept about him, almost dazzling his eyes with their ghostly gleams. He swam faster this time and having reached the bottom, he began to walk along it, as fast as the clinging substance about his limbs would allow, the while the fire-moss breathed and glowed and the color things flashed about him and monstrous, nightmare shadows fell across his shoulder upon the burning floor, flung by unseen beings.

The moss was littered by the skulls and the bones of men who had dared the Forbidden Lake and suddenly with a silent swirl of the waters, a thing rushed upon Kull. At first the king thought it to be a huge octopus for the body was that of an octopus, with long waving tentacles, but as it charged upon him he saw it had legs like a man and a hideous semi-human face leered at him from among the writhing snaky arms of the monster.

Kull braced his feet and as he felt the cruel tentacles whip about his limbs, he thrust his sword with cool accuracy into the midst of that demoniac face and the creature lumbered down and died at his feet with grisly soundless gibbering. Blood spread like a mist about him and Kull thrust strongly against the floor with his legs and shot upward.

He burst into the fast fading light and even as he did a great form came

skimming across the water toward him–a water spider, but this one was larger than a horse and its great cold eyes gleamed hellishly. Kull, keeping himself afloat with his feet and one hand, raised his sword and as the spider rushed in, he cleft it half way through the body and it sank silently.

A slight noise made him turn and another, larger than the first was almost upon him. This one flung over the king's arms and shoulders, great strands of clinging web that would have meant doom for any but a giant. But Kull burst the grim shackles as if they had been strings and seizing a leg of the thing as it towered above him, he thrust the monster through again and again till it weakened in his grasp and floated away, reddening the blue waters.

"Valka!" muttered the king, "I am not like to go without employment here. Yet these things be easy to slay–how could they have overcome Brule, who in all the Seven Kingdoms is second only to me in battle-might?"

But Kull was to find that grimmer spectres than these haunted the death-ridden abysses of Forbidden Lake. Again he dived and this time only the color-shadows and the bones of forgotten men met his glance. Again he rose for air and for the fourth time he dived.

He was not far from one of the islands and as he swam downward he wondered what strange things were hidden by the dense emerald foliage which cloaked these islands. Legend said that temples and shrines reared there that were never built by human hands and that on certain nights the lake beings came out of the deeps to enact eery rites there.

The rush came just as his feet struck the moss. It came from behind and Kull, warned by some primal instinct, whirled just in time to see a great form loom over him, a form neither man nor beast but horribly compounded of both–to feel gigantic fingers close on arm, and shoulder.

He struggled savagely but the thing held his sword arm helpless and its talons sank deeply into his left forearm. With a volcanic wrench he twisted about so that he could at least see his attacker. The thing was something like a monstrous shark but a long cruel horn curved like a saber jutted up from its snout and it had four arms, human in shape but inhuman in size and strength and in the crooked talons of the fingers.

With two arms the monster held Kull helpless and with the other two it bent his head back, to break his spine. But not even such a grim being as this might so easily conquer Kull of Atlantis. A wild rage surged up in him and the king of Valusia went berserk.

Bracing his feet against the yielding moss, he tore his left arm free with a heave and wrench of his great shoulders. With cat-like speed he sought to shift the sword from right hand to left, and failing in this, struck savagely at the monster with clenched fist. But the mocking sapphirean stuff about him

foiled him, breaking the force of his blow. The shark-man lowered his snout but before he could strike upward Kull gripped the horn with his left hand and held fast.

Then followed a test of might and endurance. Kull, unable to move with any speed in the water, knew his only hope was to keep in close and wrestle with his foe in such manner as to counterbalance the monster's quickness. He strove desperately to tear his sword arm loose and the shark-man was forced to grasp it will all four of his hands. Kull gripped the horn and dared not let go lest he be disembowelled with its terrible upward thrust, and the shark-man dared not release with a single hand the arm that held Kull's long sword.

So they wrenched and wrestled and Kull saw that he was doomed if it went on in this manner. Already he was beginning to suffer for want of air. The gleam in the cold eyes of the shark-man told that he too recognized the fact that he had but to hold Kull below the surface until he drowned.

A desperate plight indeed, for any man. But Kull of Atlantis was no ordinary man. Trained from babyhood in a hard and bloody school, with steel muscles and dauntless brain bound together by the co-ordination that makes the superfighter, he added to this a courage which never faltered and a tigerish rage which on occasion swept him up to superhuman deeds.

So now, conscious of his swiftly approaching doom and goaded to frenzy by his helplessness, he decided upon action as desperate as his need. He released the monster's horn, at the same time bending his body as far back as he could and gripping the nearest arm of the thing with the free hand.

Instantly the shark-man struck, his horn ploughing along Kull's thigh and then–the luck of Atlantis!–wedging fast in Kull's heavy girdle. And as he tore it free, Kull sent his mighty strength through the fingers that held the monster's arm, and crushed clammy flesh and inhuman bone like rotten fruit between them.

The shark-man's mouth gaped silently with the torment and he struck again wildly. Kull avoided the blow and losing their balance they went down together, half-buoyed by the jade surge in which they wallowed. And as they tossed there, Kull tore his sword arm from the weakening grip and striking upward, split the monster open.

The whole battle had consumed only a very brief time but to Kull, as he swam upward, his head singing and a great weight seeming to press his ribs, it seemed like hours. He saw dimly that the lake floor shelved suddenly upward close at hand and knew that it sloped to an island, the water became alive about him and he felt himself lapped from shoulder to heel in gigantic coils which even steel muscles could not break. His consciousness was fading–he felt himself borne along at terrific speed–there was a sound as of many bells–then suddenly he was above water and his tortured lungs were drinking in great draughts of air. He was whirling along through utter darkness and he had time only to take a long breath before he was again swept under.

Again light glowed about him and he saw the fire-moss throbbing far below. He was in the grasp of a great serpent who had flung a few lengths of sinuous body about him like huge cables and was now bearing him to what destination Valka alone knew.

Kull did not struggle, reserving his strength. If the snake did not keep him so long under water that he died, there would no doubt be a chance of battle in the creature’s lair or wherever he was being taken. As it was, Kull’s limbs were pinioned so close that he could no more free an arm than he could have flown.

The serpent, racing through the blue deeps so swiftly, was the largest Kull had ever seen–a good two hundred feet of jade and golden scales–vividly and wonderfully colored. Its eyes, when they turned toward Kull, were like icy fire if such a thing can be. Even then Kull's imaginative soul was struck with the bizarreness of the scene; that great green and gold form flying through the burning topaz of the lake, while the shadow-colors weaved dazzlingly about it.

The fire gemmed floor sloped upward again–either for an island or the lake shore–and a great cavern suddenly appeared before them. The snake glided into this–the fire-moss ceased and Kull found himself partly above the surface in unlighted darkness. He was borne along in this manner for what seemed a very long time, then the monster dived again.

Again they came up into light, but such light as Kull had never before seen. A luminous glow shimmered duskily over the face of the waters which lay dark and still. And Kull knew that he was in the Enchanted Domain under the bottom of Forbidden Lake for this was no earthly radiance; it was a black light, blacker than any darkness yet it lit the unholy waters so that he could see the dusky glimmer of them and his own dark reflection in them. The coils suddenly loosed from his limbs and he struck out for a vast bulk that loomed in the shadows in front of him.

Swimming strongly he approached, and saw that it was a great city. On a great level of black stone, it towered up and up until its sombre spires were lost in the blackness above the unhallowed light, which, black also, was yet of a different hue. Huge square-built massive buildings of mighty basaltic like blocks fronted him as he clambered out of the clammy waters and strode up the steps which were cut into the stone, like steps in a wharf, and between the buildings columns rose gigantically.

No gleam of earthly light lessened the grimness of this inhuman city but from its walls and towers the black light flowed out over the waters in vast throbbing waves.

Kull was aware that in a wide space before him, where the buildings swept away on each side, a huge concourse of beings confronted him. He blinked, striving to accustom his eyes to the strange illumination. The beings came closer and a whisper ran among them like the waving of grass in the night wind. They were light and shadowy, glimmering against the blackness of their city and their eyes were eery and luminous.

Then the king saw that one of their number stood in front of the rest. This one was much like a man and his bearded face was high and noble but a frown hovered over his magnificent brows.

“You come like the herald of all your race,” said this lake-man suddenly, “bloody and bearing a red sword.”

Kull laughed angrily for this smacked of injustice.

“Valka and Hotath!” said the king. “Most of this blood is mine own and was let by things of your cursed lake.”

“Death and ruin follow the course of your race,” said the lake-man sombrely. “Do we not know? Aye, we reigned in the Lake of blue waters before man-kind was even a dream of the gods.”

“None molests you–” began Kull.

“They fear to. In the old days men of the earth sought to invade our dark kingdom. And we slew them and there was war between the sons of men and the people of the lakes. And we came forth and spread terror among the earthlings for we knew that they bore only death for us and that they yielded only to slaying. And we wove spells and charms and burst their brains and shattered their souls with our magic so they begged for peace and it was so. The men of earth laid a tambu on this lake so that no man may come here save the king of Valusia. That was thousands of years ago. No man has ever come into the Enchanted Land and gone forth, save as a corpse floating up through the still waters of the upper lake. King of Valusia or whoever you be, you are doomed.”

Kull snarled in defiance.

“I sought not your cursed kingdom. I seek Brule the Spear-slayer whom you dragged down.”

“You lie,” the lake-man answered. “No man has dared this lake for over a hundred years. You come seeking treasure or to ravish and slay like all your bloody-handed kind. You die!”

And Kull felt the whisperings of magic charms about him; they filled the air and took physical form, floating in the shimmering light like wispy spider-webs, clutching at him with vague tentacles. But Kull swore impatiently and swept them aside and out of existence with his bare hand. For against the fierce elemental logic of the savage, the magic of decadency had no force.

“You are young and strong,” said the lake-king. “The rot of civilization has not yet entered your soul and our charms may not harm you, because you do not understand them. Then we must try other things.”

And the lake-beings about him drew daggers and moved upon Kull. Then the king laughed and set his back against a column, gripping his sword hilt until the muscles stood out on his right arm in great ridges.

“This is a game I understand, ghosts,” he laughed.

They halted.

“Seek not to evade your doom,” said the king of the lake, “for we are immortal and may not be slain by mortal arms.”

“You lie, now,” answered Kull with the craft of the barbarian, “for by your own words you feared the death my kind brought among you. You may live forever but steel can slay you. Take thought among yourselves. You are soft and weak and unskilled in arms; you bear your blades unfamiliarly. I was

born and bred to slaying. You will slay me for there are thousands of you and I but one, yet your charms have failed and many of you shall die before I fall. I will slaughter you by the scores and the hundreds. Take thought, men of the lake, is my slaying worth the lives it will cost you?"

For Kull knew that beings who slay may be slain by steel and he was unafraid. A figure of threat and doom, bloody and terrible he loomed above them.

"Aye, consider," he repeated. "Is it better that you should bring Brule to me and let us go, or that my corpse shall lie amid sword-torn heaps of your dead when the battle-shout is silent? Nay, there be Picts and Lemurians among my mercenaries who will follow my trail even into the Forbidden Lake and will drench the Enchanted Land with your gore if I die here. For they have their own tambus and they reck not of the tambus of the civilized races nor care they what may happen to Valusia but think only of me who am of barbarian blood like themselves."

"The old world reels down the road to ruin and forgetfulness," brooded the lake-king, "and we that were all powerful in by-gone days must brook to be bearded in our own kingdom by an arrogant savage. Swear that you will never set foot in Forbidden Lake again, and that you will never let the tambu be broken by others and you shall go free."

"First bring the Spear-slayer to me."

"No such man has ever come to this lake."

"Nay? The cat Saremes told me–"

"Saremes? Aye, we knew her of old when she came swimming down through the green waters and abode for some centuries in the courts of the Enchanted Land; the wisdom of the ages is hers but I knew not that she spoke the speech of earthly men. Still, there is no such man here and I swear–"

"Swear not by gods or devils," Kull broke in. "Give your word as a true man."

"I give it," said the lake-king and Kull believed for there was a majesty and a bearing about the being which made Kull feel strangely small and rude.

"And I," said Kull, "give you my word–which has never been broken–that no man shall break the tambu or molest you in any way again."

The lake-king replied with a stately inclination of his lordly head and a gesture of his hand.

"And I believe you, for you are different from any earthly man I ever knew. You are a real king and what is greater, a true man."

Kull thanked him and sheathed his sword, turning toward the steps.

"Know ye how to gain the outer world, king of Valusia?"

"As to that," answered Kull, "if I swim long enough I suppose I shall find

the way. I know that the serpent brought me clear through at least one island and possibly many and that we swam in a cave for a long time."

"You are bold," said the lake-king, "but you might swim forever in the dark."

He raised his hands and a behemoth swam to the foot of the steps.

"A grim steed," said the lake-king, "but he will bear you safe to the very shore of the upper lake."

"A moment," said Kull. "Am I at present beneath an island or the mainland, or is this land in truth beneath the lake floor?"

"You are at the center of the universe as you are always. Time, place and space are illusions, having no existence save in the mind of man which must set limits and bounds in order to understand. There is only the underlying reality, of which all appearances are but outward manifestations, just as the upper lake is fed by the waters of this real one. Go now, king, for you are a true man even though you be the first wave of the rising tide of savagery which shall overwhelm the world ere it recedes."

Kull listened respectfully, understanding little but realizing that this was high magic. He struck hands with the lake-king, shuddering a little at the feel of that which was flesh but not human flesh; then he looked once more at the great black buildings rearing silently and the murmuring moth-like forms among them, and he looked out over the shiny jet surface of the waters with the waves of black light crawling like spiders across it. And he turned and went down the stair to the water's edge and sprang on the back of the behemoth.

Eons followed, of dark caves and rushing waters and the whisper of gigantic unseen monsters; sometimes above and sometimes below the surface, the behemoth bore the king and finally the fire-moss leaped up and they swept up through the blue of the burning water and Kull waded to land.

Kull's stallion stood patiently where the king had left him and the moon was just rising over the lake, whereat Kull swore amazedly.

"A scant hour ago, by Valka, I dismounted here! I had thought that many hours and possibly days had passed since then."

He mounted and rode toward the city of Valusia, reflecting that there might have been some meaning in the lake-king's remarks about the illusion of time.

Kull was weary, angry and bewildered. The journey through the lake had cleansed him of the blood, but the motion of riding started the gash in his thigh to bleeding again, moreover the leg was stiff and irked him somewhat. Still, the main question that presented itself was that Saremes had lied to him and either through ignorance or through malicious forethought had come near

to sending him to his death. For what reason?

Kull cursed, reflecting what Tu would say and the chancellor's triumph. Still, even a talking cat might be innocently wrong but hereafter Kull determined to lay no weight to the words of such.

Kull rode into the silent silvery streets of the ancient city and the guard at the gate gaped at his appearance but wisely refrained from questioning.

He found the palace in an uproar. Swearing he stalked to his council chamber and thence to the chamber of the cat Saremes. The cat was there, curled imperturbably on her cushion, and grouped about the chamber, each striving to talk down the others, were Tu and the chief councillors. The slave Kuthulos was nowhere to be seen.

Kull was greeted by a wild acclamation of shouts and questions but he strode straight to Saremes' cushion and glared at her.

"Saremes," said the king, "you lied to me!"

The cat stared at him coldly, yawned and made no reply. Kull stood, nonplused and Tu seized his arm.

"Kull, where in Valka's name have you been? Whence this blood?"

Kull jerked loose irritably.

"Leave be," he snarled. "This cat sent me on a fool's errand–where is Brule?"

"Kull!"

The king whirled and saw Brule stride through the door, his scanty garments stained by the dust of hard riding. The bronze features of the Pict were immobile but his dark eyes gleamed with relief.

"Name of seven devils!" said the warrior testily, to hide this emotion. "My riders have combed the hills and the forest for you–where have you been?"

"Searching the waters of Forbidden Lake for your worthless carcase," answered Kull with grim enjoyment of the Pict's perturbation.

“Forbidden Lake!” Brule exclaimed with the freedom of the savage. “Are you in your dotage? What would I be doing there? I accompanied Ka-nu yesterday to the Zarfhaanan border and returned to hear Tu ordering out all the army to search for you. My men have since then ridden in every direction except the Forbidden Lake where we never thought of going.”

“Saremes lied to me–” Kull began.

But he was drowned out by a chatter of scolding voices, the main theme being that a king should never ride off so unceremoniously, leaving the kingdom to take care of itself.

“Silence!” roared Kull, lifting his arms, his eyes blazing dangerously. “Valka and Hotath! Am I an urchin to be rated for truancy? Tu, tell me what has occurred.”

In the sudden silence which followed this royal outburst, Tu began:

“My lord, we have been duped from the beginning. This cat is, as I have maintained, a delusion and a dangerous fraud.”

“Yet–”

“My lord, have you never heard of men who could hurl their voice to a distance, making it appear that another spoke, or that invisible voices sounded?”

Kull flushed. “Aye, by Valka! Fool that I should have forgotten! An old wizard of Lemuria had that gift. Yet who spoke–”

“Kuthulos!” exclaimed Tu. “Fool am I not to have remembered Kuthulos, a slave, aye, but the greatest scholar and the wisest man in all the Seven Empires. Slave of that she-fiend Delcardes who even now writhes on the rack!”

Kull gave a sharp exclamation.

“Aye!” said Tu grimly. “When I entered and found that you had ridden away, none knew where, I suspected treachery and I sat me down and thought hard. And I remembered Kuthulos and his art of voice-throwing and of how the false cat had told you small things but never great prophecies, giving false arguments for reason of refraining.

“So I knew that Delcardes had sent you this cat and Kuthulos to befool you and gain your confidence and finally send you to your doom. So I sent for Delcardes and ordered her put to the torture so that she might confess all. She planned cunningly. Aye, Saremes must have her slave Kuthulos with her all the time–while he talked through her mouth and put strange ideas in your mind.”

“Then where is Kuthulos?” asked Kull.

“He had disappeared when I came to Saremes’ chamber, and–”

“Ho, Kull!” a cheery voice boomed from the door and a bearded elfish figure strode in, accompanied by a slim, frightened girlish shape.

“Ka-nu! Delcardes–so they did not torture you, after all!”

“Oh, my lord!” she ran to him and fell on her knees before him, clasping his feet. “Oh, Kull,” she wailed, “they accuse me of terrible things! I am guilty of deceiving you, my lord, but I meant no harm! I only wished to marry Kulra Thoom!”

Kull raised her to her feet, perplexed but pitying her evident terror and remorse.

“Kull,” said Ka-nu, “it is a good thing I returned when I did, else you and Tu had tossed the kingdom into the sea!”

Tu snarled wordlessly, always jealous of the Pictish ambassador, who was also Kull’s adviser.

“I returned to find the whole palace in an uproar, men rushing hither and yon and falling over one another in doing nothing. I sent Brule and his riders to look for you, and going to the torture chamber–naturally I went first to the torture chamber, since Tu was in charge–”

The chancellor winced.

“Going to the torture chamber–”

Ka-nu continued placidly, “I found them about to torture little Delcardes who wept and told all she had to tell but they did not believe her–she is only an inquisitive child, Kull, in spite of her beauty and all. So I brought her here.

“Now, Kull, Delcardes spoke truth when she said Saremes was her guest and that the cat was very ancient. True; she is a cat of the Old Race and wiser than other cats, going and coming as she pleases, but still a cat. Delcardes had spies in the palace to report to her such small things as the secret letter which you hid in your dagger sheath and the surplus in the treasury–the courtier who reported that was one of her spies and had discovered the surplus and told her before the royal treasurer knew. Her spies were your most loyal retainers and the things they told her harmed you not and aided her, whom they all love, for they knew she meant no harm.

“Her idea was to have Kuthulos, speaking through the mouth of Saremes, gain your confidence through small prophecies and facts which anyone might know, such as warning you against Thulsa Doom. Then, by constant urging you to let Kulra Thoom marry Delcardes, to accomplish what was Delcardes’ only desire.”

“Then Kuthulos turned traitor,” said Tu.

And at that moment there was a noise at the chamber door and guards entered haling between them a tall, gaunt form, his face masked by a veil, his arms bound.

“Kuthulos!”

“Aye, Kuthulos,” said Ka-nu, but he seemed not at ease and his eyes roved restlessly, “Kuthulos, no doubt, with his veil over his face to hide the

workings of his mouth and neck muscles as he talked through Saremes."

Kull eyed the silent figure which stood there like a statue. A silence fell over the group, as if a cold wind had passed over them. There was a tenseness in the atmosphere. Delcardes looked at the silent figure and her eyes widened as the guards told in terse sentences how the slave had been captured while trying to escape from the palace down a little used corridor.

Then silence fell again and more tensely as Kull stepped forward and reached forth a hand to tear the veil from the hidden face. Through the thin fabric Kull felt two eyes burn into his consciousness. None noticed Ka-nu clench his hands and tense himself as if for a terrific struggle.

Then as Kull's hand almost touched the veil, a sudden sound broke the breathless silence–such a sound as a man might make by striking the floor with his forehead or elbow. The noise seemed to come from a wall and Kull, crossing the room with a stride, smote against a panel, from behind which the rapping sounded. A hidden door swung inward, revealing a dusty corridor, upon which lay the bound and gagged form of a man.

They dragged him forth and standing him upright, unbound him.

"Kuthulos!" shrieked Delcardes.

Kull stared. The man's face, now revealed, was thin, and kindly like a teacher of philosophy and morals.

"Yes, my lords and lady," he said, "that man who wears my veil stole upon me through the secret door, struck me down and bound me. I lay there, hearing him send the king to what he thought was Kull's death, but could do nothing."

"Then who is he?" All eyes turned toward the veiled figure and stepped forward.

"Lord king, beware!" exclaimed the real Kuthulos. "He–"

Kull tore the veil away with one motion and recoiled with a gasp. Delcardes screamed and her knees gave way; the councillors pressed backward, faces white and the guard released their grasp and shrank horror-struck away.

The face of the man was a bare white skull, in whose eye sockets flamed livid fire!

"Thulsa Doom!"

"Aye, I guessed as much!" exclaimed Ka-nu.

"Aye, Thulsa Doom, fools!" the voice echoed cavernously and hollowly. "The greatest of all wizards and your eternal foe, Kull of Atlantis. You have won this tilt but, beware, there shall be others."

He burst the bonds on his arms with a single contemptuous gesture and stalked toward the door, the throng giving back before him.

“You are a fool of no discernment, Kull,” said he, “else you had never mistaken that other fool, Kuthulos, for me, even with the veil and his garments.”

Kull saw that it was so, for though the twain were alike in height and general shape, the flesh of the skull-faced wizard was like that of a man long dead.

The king stood, not fearful like the others, but so amazed at the turn events had taken that he was speechless. Then even as he sprang forward, like a man waking from a dream, Brule charged with the silent ferocity of a tiger, his curved sword gleaming. And like a gleam of light it flashed into the ribs of Thulsa Doom, piercing him through and through so that the point stood out between his shoulders.

Brule regained his blade with a quick wrench as he leaped back, then, crouching to strike again were it necessary, he halted. Not a drop of blood oozed from the wound which in a living man had been mortal. The skull-faced one laughed.

“Ages ago I died as men die!” he taunted. “Nay, I shall pass to some other sphere when my time comes, not before. I bleed not for my veins are empty and I feel only a slight coldness which shall pass when the wound closes, as it

is even now closing. Stand back, fool, your master goes but he shall come again to you and you shall scream and shrivel and die in that coming! Kull, I salute you!”

And while Brule hesitated, unnerved, and Kull halted in undecided amazement Thulsa Doom stepped through the door and vanished before their very eyes.

“At least, Kull,” said Ka-nu later, “you have won your first tilt with the skull-faced one, as he admitted. Next time we must be more wary, for he is a fiend incarnate–an owner of magic black and unholy. He hates you for he is a satellite of the great serpent whose power you broke; he has the gift of illusion and of invisibility, which only he possesses. He is grim and terrible.”

“I fear him not,” said Kull. “The next time I will be prepared and my answer shall be a sword thrust, even though he be unslayable, which thing I doubt. Brule did not find his vitals, which even a living dead man must have, that is all.”

Then turning to Tu, “Lord Tu, it would seem that the civilized races also have their tambus, since the blue lake is forbidden to all save myself.”

Tu answered testily, angry because Kull had given the happy Delcardes permission to marry whom she desired:

“My lord, that is no heathen tambu such as your tribe bows to; it is a matter of state-craft, to preserve peace between Valusia and the lake-beings who are magicians.”

“And we keep tambus so as not to offend unseen spirits of tigers and eagles,” said Kull. “And therein I see no difference.”

“At any rate,” said Tu, “you must beware of Thulsa Doom; for he vanished into another dimension and as long as he is there he is invisible and harmless to us, but he will come again.”

“Ah, Kull,” sighed the old rascal, Ka-nu, “mine is a hard life compared to yours; Brule and I were drunk in Zarfhaana and I fell down a flight of stairs, most damnably bruising my shins. And all the while you lounged in sinful ease on the silk of the kingship, Kull.”

Kull glared at him wordlessly and turned his back, giving his attention to the drowsing Saremes.

“She is not a wizard-beast, Kull,” said the Spear-slayer. “She is wise but she merely looks her wisdom and does not speak. Yet her eyes fascinate me with their antiquity. A mere cat, just the same.”

“Still, Brule,” said Kull, admiringly, stroking her silky fur, “still, she is a very ancient cat, very.”

The Screaming Skull of Silence

The Screaming Skull of Silence

–And a dozen death-blots blotched him
On jowl and shank and huckle,
And he knocked on his skull with his knuckle
And laughed–if you'd call it laughter–
At the billion facets of dying
In his outstart eye-balls shining.–

Men still name it The Day of the King's Fear. For Kull, king of Valusia, was only a man after all. There was never a bolder man, but all things have their limits, even courage. Of course Kull had known apprehension and cold whispers of dread, sudden starts of horror and even the shadow of unknown terror. But these had been but starts and leapings in the shadows of the mind, caused mainly by surprize or some loathsome mystery or unnatural thing– more repugnance than real fear. So real fear in him was so rare a thing that men mark the day.

Yet there was a time that Kull knew Fear, stark, terrible and unreasoning, and his marrow weakened and his blood ran cold. So men speak of the time of Kull's Fear and they do not speak in scorn nor does Kull feel any shame. No, for as it came about the thing rebounded to his undying glory.

Thus it came to be. Kull sat at ease on the throne of society, listening idly to the conversation of Tu, chief councillor, Ka-nu, ambassador from Pictdom, Brule, Ka-nu's right-hand man, and Kuthulos the slave, who was yet the greatest scholar in the Seven Empires.

"All is illusion," Kuthulos was saying, "all outward manifestations of the underlying Reality, which is beyond human comprehension, since there are no relative things by which the finite mind may measure the infinite. The One may underlie all, or each natural illusion may possess a basic entity. All these things were known to Raama, the greatest mind of all the ages, who eons ago freed humanity from the grasp of unknown demons and raised the race to its heights."

"He was a mighty necromancer," said Ka-nu.

"He was no wizard," said Kuthulos, "no chanting, mumbling conjurer, divining from snakes' livers. There was naught of mummery about Raama. He had grasped the First Principles, he knew the Elements and he understood natural forces, acted upon by natural causes, producing natural results. He accomplished his apparent miracles by the exercise of his powers in natural ways, which were as simple in their manners to him, as lighting a fire is to us, and as much beyond our ken as our fire would have been to our ape-ancestors."

"Then why did he not give all his secrets to the race?" asked Tu.

"He knew it is not good for man to know too much. Some villain would subjugate the whole race, nay the whole universe, if he knew as much as Raama knew. Man must learn by himself and expand in soul as he learns."

"Yet, you say all is illusion," persisted Ka-nu, shrewd in state-craft but ignorant in philosophy and science, and respecting Kuthulos for his knowledge. "How is that? Do we not hear and see and feel?"

“What is sight and sound?” countered the slave. “Is not sound absence of silence, and silence absence of sound? The absence of a thing is not material substance. It is–nothing. And how can nothing exist?”

“Then why are things?” asked Ka-nu like a puzzled child.

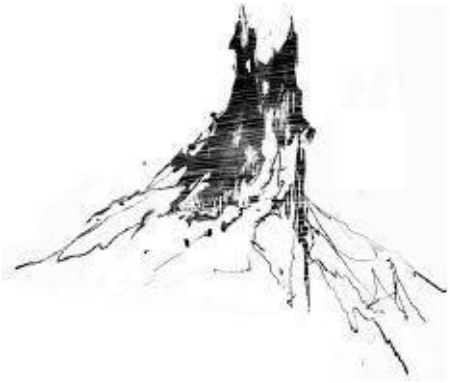
“They are appearances of reality. Like silence; somewhere exists the essence of silence, the soul of silence. Nothing that is something; an absence so absolute that it takes material form. How many of you ever heard complete silence? None of us! Always there are some noises–the whisper of the wind, the flutter of an insect, even the growing of the grass, or on the desert the murmur of the sands. But at the center of silence, there is no sound.”

“Raama,” said Ka-nu, “long ago shut a spectre of silence into a great castle and sealed him there for all time.”

“Aye,” said Brule, “I have seen the castle–a great black thing on a lone hill, in a wild region of Valusia. Since time immemorial it has been known as the Skull of Silence.”

“Ha!” Kull was interested now. “My friends, I would like to look upon this thing!”

“Lord king,” said Kuthulos, “it is not good to tamper with what Raama made fast. For he was wiser than any man. I have heard the legend that by his arts he imprisoned a demon–not by his arts, say I, but by his knowledge of the natural forces, and not a demon but some element which threatened the existence of the race.



“The might of that element is evinced by the fact that not even Raama was able to destroy it–he only imprisoned it.”

“Enough.” Kull gestured impatiently. “Raama has been dead so many thousand years that it wearies me to think on it. I ride to find the Skull of Silence; who rides with me?”

All of those who listened to him, and a hundred of the Red Slayers, Valusia’s mightiest war force, rode with Kull when he swept out of the royal city in the early dawn. They rode up among the mountains of Zalgara and after many days’ search, they came upon a lone hill rising sombrely from the surrounding plateaus and on its summit a great stark castle, black as doom.

“This is the place,” said Brule. “No people live within a hundred miles of this castle, nor have they in the memory of man. It is shunned like a region accursed.”

Kull reined his great stallion to a halt and gazed. No one spoke and Kull was aware of the strange, almost intolerable stillness. When he spoke again every one started. To the king it seemed that waves of deadening quiet emanated from that brooding castle on the hill. No birds sang in the surrounding land and no wind moved the branches of the stunted trees. As Kull’s horsemen rode up the slope, their footfalls on the rocks seemed to tinkle drearily and far away, dying without echo.

They halted before the castle that crouched there like a dark monster and Kuthulos again essayed to argue with the king.

“Kull, consider! If you burst that seal, you may loose upon the world a monster whose might and frenzy no man can stay!”

Kull, impatient of restraint, waved him aside. He was in the grip of a wayward perverseness, a common fault of kings, and though usually reasonable he had now made up his mind and was not to be swerved from his course.

“There are ancient writings on the seal, Kuthulos,” he said. “Read them to me.”

Kuthulos unwillingly dismounted and the rest followed suit, all save the common soldiers who sat their horses like bronze images in the pale sunlight. The castle leered at them like a sightless skull, for there were no windows whatever and only one great door, that of iron and bolted and sealed. Apparently the building was all in one chamber.

Kull gave a few orders as to the disposition of the troops and was irritated when he found he was forced to raise his voice unseemingly in order for the commanders to understand him. Their answers came dimly and indistinctly.

He approached the door, followed by his four comrades. There on a frame

beside the door hung a curious appearing gong, apparently of jade–a sort of green in shade. But Kull could not be sure of the color for to his amazed stare it changed and shifted, and sometimes his gaze seemed to be drawn into great depths and sometimes to glance extreme shallowness. Beside the gong hung a mallet of the same strange material. He struck it lightly and then gasped, nearly stunned by the crash of sound which followed–it was like all earth noises concentrated.

"Read the writings, Kuthulos," he commanded, again, and the slave bent forward in considerable awe, for no doubt these words had been carved by the great Raama himself.

"That which was may be again," he intoned, "then beware, all sons of men!"

He straightened, a look of fright on his face.

"A warning! A warning straight from Raama! Mark ye, Kull, mark ye!"

Kull snorted and drawing his sword, rent the seal from its hold and cut through the great metal bolt. He struck again and again, being aware of the comparative silence with which the blows fell. The bars fell, the door swung open.

Kuthulos screamed. Kull reeled, stared–the chamber was empty? *No!* He saw nothing, there was nothing to see, yet he felt the air throb about him as *something* came billowing from that foul chamber in great unseen waves. Kuthulos leaned to his shoulder and shrieked–and his words came faintly as from over cosmic distance:

"The silence! This is the soul of all Silence!"

Sound ceased. Horses plunged and their riders fell face first into the dust and lay clutching at their heads with their hands, screaming without sound.

Kull alone stood erect, his futile sword thrust in front of him. Silence! Utter and absolute! Throbbing, billowing waves of still horror! Men opened their mouths and shrieked but there was no sound!

The Silence entered Kull's soul; it clawed at his heart; it sent tentacles of steel into his brain. He clutched at his forehead in torment; his skull was bursting, shattering. In the wave of horror which engulfed him Kull saw red and colossal visions–the Silence spreading out over the earth, over the Universe! Men died in gibbering stillness; the roar of rivers, the crash of seas, the noise of winds faltered and ceased to be. All Sound was drowned by the Silence. Silence, soul destroying, brain shattering–blotting out all life on earth and reaching monstrously up into the skies, crushing the very singing of the stars!

And then Kull knew fear, horror, terror–overwhelming, grisly, soul-killing. Faced by the ghastliness of his vision, he swayed and staggered drunkenly, gone wild with fear. Oh gods, for a sound, the very slightest, faintest noise! Kull opened his mouth like the grovelling maniacs behind him and his heart nearly burst from his breast in his effort to shriek. The throbbing stillness mocked him. He smote against the metal sill with his sword. And still the billowing waves flowed from the chamber, clawing at him, tearing at him, taunting him like a being sensate with terrible Life.

Ka-nu and Kuthulos lay motionless. Tu writhed on his belly, his head in his hands, and squalled soundlessly like a dying jackal. Brule wallowed in the dust like a wounded wolf, clawing blindly at his scabbard.

Kull could almost see the form of the Silence now, the frightful Silence that was coming out of its Skull at last, to burst the skulls of men. It twisted, it writhed in unholy wisps and shadows, it laughed at him! It lived! Kull staggered and toppled, and as he did his outflung arm struck the gong. Kull heard no sound but he felt a distinct throb and jerk of the waves about him–a slight withdrawal, involuntary, just as a man’s hand jerks back from the flame.

Ah, old Raama left a safe-guard for the race, even in death! Kull’s dizzy brain suddenly read the riddle. The sea! The gong was like the sea, changing green shades, never still, now deep and now shallow–*never silent*.

The sea! Vibrating, pulsing, booming day and night–the greatest enemy of the Silence. Reeling, dizzy, nauseated he caught up the jade mallet. His knees gave way but he clung with one hand to the frame, clutching the mallet with the other, in a desperate death grip. The Silence surged wrathfully about him.

Mortal, who are you to oppose me, who am older than the gods? Before Life was I was, and shall be when Life dies. Before the invader sound was born, the Universe was silent and shall be again. For I shall spread out through all the cosmos and kill Sound–kill Sound–kill Sound–kill Sound!

The roar of Silence reverberated through the caverns of Kull's crumbling brain in abysmal chanting monotones as he struck on the gong–again–and again–and again!

And at each blow the Silence gave back–inch by inch–inch by inch. Back, back, back. Kull renewed the force of his mallet blows. Now he could faintly hear the far-away tinkle of the gong, over unthinkable voids of stillness–as if someone on the other side of the Universe were striking a silver coin with a horse-shoe nail. At each tiny vibration of noise, the wavering Silence started and shuddered. The tentacles shortened, the waves contracted. The Silence shrank.

Back and back and back–and back. Now the wisps hovered in the doorway and behind Kull men whimpered and wallowed to their knees, chins sagging and eyes vacant. Kull tore the gong from its frame and reeled toward the door. He was a finish fighter–no compromise for him. There would be no bolting the great door upon the horror again. The whole Universe should have halted to watch a man justifying the existence of man-kind, scaling sublime heights of glory in his supreme atonement.

He stood in the doorway and leaned against the waves that hung there, hammering ceaselessly. All Hell flowed out to meet him, from the fright thing whose very last stronghold he was invading. All of the Silence was now in the chamber again, forced back by the unconquerable crashings of Sound–Sound concentrated from all the sounds and noises of earth and imprisoned by the master hand that long ago conquered both Sound and Silence.

And here Silence gathered all its forces for one last attack. Hells of soundless cold and noiseless flame whirled about Kull. Here was a thing, elemental and real. Silence the absence of sound, Kuthulos had said–Kuthulos who now grovelled and yammered empty nothingnesses.

Here was more than an absence–an absence whose utter absence became a presence–an abstract illusion that was a material reality. Kull reeled, blind, stunned, numb, almost insensible from the onslaught of cosmic forces upon him; soul, body and mind. Cloaked by the whirling tentacles, the noise of the gong died out again. But Kull never ceased. His tortured brain rocked but he thrust his feet against the sill and shoved powerfully forward. He encountered material resistance, like a wall of solid fire, hotter than flame and colder than ice. Still he plunged forward and felt it give–give.

Step by step, foot by foot he fought his way into the chamber of death,

driving the Silence before him. Every step was screaming, demoniac torture; every foot was ravaging Hell. Shoulders hunched, head down, arms raising and falling in jerky rhythm, Kull forced his way, and great drops of blood gathered on his brow and dropped unceasingly.

Behind him men were beginning to stagger up, weak and dizzy from the Silence that had invaded their brains. They gaped at the door, where the king fought his deathly battle for the universe. Brule crawled blindly forward, trailing his sword, still dazed, and only following his stunned instinct which bade him follow the king though the trail led to Hell.

Kull forced the Silence back, step by step, feeling it growing weaker and weaker, feeling it dwindling. Now the sound of the gong pealed out and grew and grew. It filled the room, the earth, the sky. The Silence cringed before it, and as the Silence dwindled and was forced into itself, it took hideous form that Kull saw yet did not see. His arm seemed dead but with a mighty effort he increased his blows. Now the Silence writhed in a dark corner and shrunk and shrunk. Again, a last blow! All the sound in the Universe rushed together in one roaring, yelling, shattering, engulfing burst of sound! The gong blew into a million vibrating fragments! And Silence screamed!

The Striking of the Gong

The Striking of the Gong

Somewhere in the hot red darkness there began a throbbing. A pulsating cadence, soundless but vibrant with reality, sent out long rippling tendrils that flowed through the breathless air. The man stirred, groped about with blind hands, and sat up. At first it seemed to him that he was floating on the even and regular waves of a black ocean, rising and falling with a monotonous regularity which hurt him physically somehow. He was aware of the pulsing and throbbing of the air and he reached out his hands as though to catch the elusive waves. But was the throbbing in the air about him, or in the brain inside his skull? He could not understand and a fantastic thought came to him–a feeling that he was locked inside his own skull.

The pulsing dwindled, centralized, and he held his aching head in his

hands and tried to remember. Remember what?

“This is a strange thing,” he murmured. “Who or what am I? What place is this? What has happened and why am I here? Have I always been here?”

He rose to his feet and sought to look about him. Utter darkness met his glance. He strained his eyes, but no single gleam of light met them. He began to walk forward, haltingly, hands out before him, seeking light as instinctively as a growing plant seeks it.

“This is surely not everything,” he mused. “There must be something else–what is different from this? Light! I know–I remember Light, though I do not remember what Light is. Surely I have known a different world than this.”

Far away a faint grey light began to glow. He hastened toward it. The gleam widened, until it was as if he were striding down a long and ever widening corridor. Then he came out suddenly into dim starlight and felt the wind cold in his face.

“This is light,” he murmured, “but this is not all yet.”

He felt and recognized a sensation of terrific height. High above him, even with his eyes and below him, flashed and blazed great stars in a majestic glittering cosmic ocean. He frowned abstractedly as he gazed at these stars.

Then he was aware that he was not alone. A tall vague shape loomed before him in the starlight. His hand shot instinctively to his left hip, then fell away limply. He was naked and no weapon hung at his side.

The shape moved nearer and he saw that it was a man, apparently a very ancient man, though the features were indistinct and illusive in the faint light.

“You are new come here?” said this figure in a clear deep voice which was much like the chiming of a jade gong. At the sound a sudden trickle of memory began in the brain of the man who heard the voice.

He rubbed his chin in a bewildered manner.

“Now I remember,” said he, “I am Kull, king of Valusia–but what am I doing here, without garments or weapons?”

“No man can bring anything through the Door with him,” said the other, cryptically. “Think, Kull of Valusia, know you not how you came?”

“I was standing in the doorway of the council chamber,” said Kull, dazedly, “and I remember that the watchman on the outer tower was striking the gong to denote the hour–then suddenly the crash of the gong merged into a wild and sudden flood of shattering sound. All went dark and red sparks flashed for an instant before my eyes. Then I awoke in a cavern or a corridor of some sort, remembering nothing.”

“You passed through the Door; it always seems dark.”

“Then I am dead? By Valka, some enemy must have been lurking among

the columns of the palace and struck me down as I was speaking with Brule, the Pictish warrior."

"I have not said you were dead," answered the dim figure. "Mayhap the Door is not utterly closed. Such things have been."

"But what place is this? Is it paradise or Hell? This is not the world I have known since birth. And those stars–I have never seen them before. Those constellations are mightier and more fiery than I ever knew in life."

"There are worlds beyond worlds, universes within and without universes," said the ancient. "You are upon a different planet than that upon which you were born, you are in a different universe, doubtless in a different dimension."

"Then I am certainly dead."

"What is death but a traversing of eternities and a crossing of cosmic oceans? But I have not said that you are dead."

"Then where in Valka's name am I?" roared Kull, his short stock of patience exhausted.

"Your barbarian brain clutches at material actualities," answered the other tranquilly. "What does it matter where you are, or whether you are dead, as you call it? You are a part of that great ocean which is Life, which washes upon all shores, and you are as much a part of it in one place as in another, and as sure to eventually flow back to the Source of it, which gave birth to all Life. As for that, you are bound to Life for all Eternity as surely as a tree, a rock, a bird or a world is bound. You call leaving your tiny planet, quitting your crude physical form–death!"

"But I still have my body."

"I have not said that you are dead, as you name it. As for that, you may be still upon your little planet, as far as you know. Worlds within worlds, universes within universes. Things exist too small and too large for human comprehension. Each pebble on the beaches of Valusia contains countless universes within itself, and itself as a whole is as much a part of the great plan of all universes, as is the sun you know. Your universe, Kull of Valusia, may be a pebble on the shore of a mighty kingdom.

"You have broken the bounds of material limitations. You may be in a universe which goes to make up a gem on the robe you wore on Valusia's throne or that universe you knew may be in the spider web which lies there on the grass near your feet. I tell you, size and space and time are relative and do not really exist."

"Surely you are a god?" said Kull curiously.

"The mere accumulation of knowledge and the acquiring of wisdom does not make a god," answered the other rather impatiently. "Look!" A shadowy

hand pointed to the great blazing gems which were the stars.

Kull looked and saw that they were changing swiftly. A constant weaving, an incessant changing of design and pattern was taking place.

“The ‘everlasting’ stars change in their own time, as swiftly as the races of men rise and fade. Even as we watch, upon those which are planets, beings are rising from the slime of the primeval, are climbing up the long slow roads to culture and wisdom, and are being destroyed with their dying worlds. All life and a part of life. To them it seems billions of years; to us, but a moment. All life. And a part of life.”

Kull watched fascinated, as huge stars and mighty constellations blazed and waned and faded, while others equally as radiant took their places, to be in turn supplanted.

Then suddenly the hot red darkness flowed over him again, blotting out all the stars. As through a thick fog, he heard a faint familiar clashing.

Then he was on his feet, reeling. Sunlight met his eyes, the tall marble pillars and walls of a palace, the wide curtained windows through which the sunlight flowed like molten gold. He passed a swift, dazed hand over his body feeling his garments and the sword at his side. He was bloody; a red stream trickled down his temple from a shallow cut. But most of the blood on his limbs and clothing was not his. At his feet in a horrid crimson wallow lay what had been a man. The clashing he had heard, ceased, re-echoing.

“Brule! What is this?! What happened?! Where have I been?”

“You had nearly been on a journey to old king Death’s realms,” answered the Pict with a mirthless grin as he cleansed his sword. “That spy was lying in wait behind a column and was on you like a leopard as you turned to speak to me in the doorway. Whoever plotted your death must have had great power to so send a man to his certain doom. Had not the sword turned in his hand and struck glancing instead of straight, you had gone before him with a cleft skull, instead of standing here now mulling over a mere flesh wound.”

“But surely,” said Kull, “that was hours agone.”

Brule laughed.

“You are still mazed, lord king. From the time he leaped and you fell, to the time I slashed the heart out of him, a man could not have counted the fingers of one hand. And during the time you were lying in his blood and yours on the floor, no more than twice that time elapsed. See, Tu has not yet arrived with bandages and he scurried for them the moment you went down.”

“Aye, you are right,” answered Kull, “I cannot understand–but just before I was struck down I heard the gong sounding the hour, and it was still sounding when I came to myself.

“Brule, there is no such thing as time, nor space; for I have travelled the

longest journey of my life, and have lived countless millions of years during the striking of the gong.”

The Altar and the Scorpion

The Altar and the Scorpion

“God of the crawling darkness, grant me aid!”

A slim youth knelt in the gloom, his white body shimmering like ivory. The marble polished floor was cold to his knees but his heart was colder than the stone.

High above him, merged into the masking shadows, loomed the great lapis lazuli ceiling, upheld by marble walls. Before him glimmered a golden altar and on this altar shone a huge crystal image–a scorpion, wrought with a craft surpassing mere art.

“Great Scorpion,” the boy continued his invocation. “Aid thy worshipper! Thou knowest how in by-gone days, Gonra of the Sword, my greatest ancestor, died before thy shrine on a heap of slain barbarians who sought to defile thy holiness. Through the mouths of thy priests, thou promised aid to Gonra’s race for all the years to come!

“Great Scorpion! Never has man or woman of my blood before reminded thee of thy vow! But now in my hour of bitter need I come before thee, to abjure thee to remember that oath, by the blood drunk by Gonra’s blade, by the blood spilled from Gonra’s veins!

“Great Scorpion! Guron, high priest of the Black Shadow is my enemy!

Kull, king of all Valusia, rides from his purple spired city to smite with fire and steel the priests who have defied him and still offer human sacrifice to the dark elder gods. But before the king may arrive and save us, I and the girl I love shall lie stark on the black altar in the Temple of Everlasting Darkness. Guron has sworn! He will give our soft bodies to ancient and abhorred abominations, and at last, our souls to the god that lurks forever in the Black Shadow.

"Kull sits high on the throne of Valusia and now he rides to our aid, but Guron rules this mountain city and even now he follows me! Great Scorpion, aid us! Remember Gonra, who gave up his life for you when the Atlantean savages carried the torch and sword into Valusia!"

The boy's slender form drooped, his head sank on his bosom despairingly. The great shimmering image on the altar gave back an icy sheen in the dim light and no sign came to its worshipper, to show that the curious god had heard that passionate invocation.

Suddenly the youth started erect. Quick steps throbbed on the long wide steps outside the temple. A girl darted into the shadowed doorway like a white flame blown before the wind.

"Guron–he comes!" she gasped as she flew into her lover's arms.

The boy's face went white and his embrace tightened as he gazed apprehensively at the doorway. Footfalls, heavy and sinister, clashed on the marble and a shape of menace loomed in the opening.

Guron the high priest was a tall, gaunt man, a cadaverous giant. His evil eyes glimmered like fiery pools under his penthouse brows and his thin gash of a mouth gaped in a silent laugh. His only garment was a silken loin cloth, through which was thrust a cruel curved dagger, and he carried a short heavy whip in his lean and powerful hand.

His two victims clung to each other and gazed white eyed at their foe, as birds stare at a serpent. And Guron's slow swaying stride as he advanced was not unlike the sinuous glide of a crawling snake.

“Guron, have a care!” the youth spoke bravely but his voice faltered from the fearful terror that gripped him. “If you have no fear of the king or pity for us, beware offending the Great Scorpion, under whose protection we are!”

Guron laughed in his might and arrogance.

“The king!” he jeered. “What means the king to me, who am mightier than any king? The Great Scorpion? Ho! Ho! A forgotten god, a deity remembered only by children and women! Would you pit your Scorpion against the Black Shadow? Fool! Valka himself, god of all gods, could not save you now! You are sworn to the god of the Black Shadow!”

He swept toward the cowering youngsters and gripped their white shoulders, sinking his talon-like nails deep into the soft flesh. They sought to resist but he laughed and with incredible strength, lifted them in the air, where he dangled them at arm’s length, as a man might dangle a baby. His grating, metallic laughter filled the room with echoes of evil mockery.

Then, holding the youth between his knees, he bound the girl hand and foot while she whimpered in his cruel clutch, then flinging her roughly to the floor, bound the youth likewise. Stepping back, he surveyed his work. The girl’s frightened sobs sounded quick and panting in the silence. At last the high priest spoke.

“Fools, to think to escape me! Always men of your blood, boy, have opposed me in council and court. Now you pay and the Black Shadow drinks. Ho! ho! I rule the city today, let he be king who may!

“My priests throng the streets, full armed, and no man dare say me nay! Were the king in the saddle this moment, he could not arrive and break my swordsmen in time to save you.”

His eyes roved about the temple and fell upon the golden altar and the silent crystal scorpion.

“Ho ho! What fools to pin your faith on a god whom men have long ceased to worship! Who has not even a priest to attend him, and who is granted a shrine only because of the memory of his former greatness, who is accorded reverence only by simple people and foolish women!

“The real gods are dark and bloody! Remember my words when soon you lie on an ebon altar behind which broods a black shadow forever! Before you die you shall know the real gods, the powerful, the terrible gods, who came from forgotten worlds and lost realms of blackness. Who had their birth on frozen stars, and black suns brooding beyond the light of any stars! You shall know the brain shattering truth of that Unnamable One, to whose reality no earthly likeness may be given, but whose symbol is–the Black Shadow!”

The girl ceased to cry, frozen, like the youth, into dazed silence. They sensed, behind these threats, a hideous and inhuman gulf of monstrous shadows.

Guron took a stride toward them, bent and reached claw-like hands to grip and lift them to his shoulders. He laughed as they sought to writhe away from him. His fingers closed on the girl’s tender shoulder–

A scream shattered the crystal gong of the silence into a million vibrating shards as Guron bounded into the air and fell on his face, screeching and writhing. Some small creature scurried away and vanished through the door. Guron’s screams dwindled into a high thin squealing and broke short at the highest note. Silence fell like a deathly mist.

At last the boy spoke in an awed whisper:

“What was it?”

“A scorpion!” the girl’s answer came low and tremulous. “It crawled across my bare bosom without harming me, and when Guron seized me, it stung him!”

Another silence fell. Then the boy spoke again, hesitantly:

“No scorpion has been seen in this city for longer than men remember.”

“The Great One summoned this of his people to our aid!” whispered the girl. “The gods never forget, and the Great Scorpion has kept his oath! Let us

give thanks to him!”

And, bound hand and foot as they were, the youthful lovers wriggled about on their faces where they lay giving praise to the great silent glistening scorpion on the altar for a long time–until a distant clash of many silver shod hoofs and the clangor of swords bore them the coming of the king.

The Curse of the Golden Skull

The Curse of the Golden Skull

Rotath of Lemuria was dying. Blood had ceased to flow from the deep sword gash under his heart, but the pulse in his temple hammered like kettle drums.

Rotath lay on a marble floor. Granite columns rose about him and a silver idol stared with ruby eyes at the man who lay at its feet. The bases of the columns were carved with curious monsters; above the shrine sounded a vague whispering. The trees which hemmed in and hid that mysterious fane spread long waving branches above it, and these branches were vibrant with curious leaves which rustled in the wind. From time to time great black roses scattered their dusky petals down.

Rotath lay dying and he used his fading breath in calling down curses on his slayers–on the faithless king who had betrayed him, and on that barbarian chief, Kull of Atlantis, who dealt him the death blow.

Acolyte of the nameless gods, and dying in an unknown shrine on the leafy summit of Lemuria's highest mountain–Rotath's weird inhuman eyes smoldered with a terrible cold fire. A pageant of glory and splendor passed before his mind's eye. The acclaim of worshippers, the roar of silver trumpets, the whispering shadows of mighty and mystic temples where great wings swept unseen–then the intrigues, the onslaught of the invaders–death!

Rotath cursed the king of Lemuria–the king to whom he had taught fearful and ancient mysteries and forgotten abominations. Fool that he had been to reveal his powers to a weakling who, having learned to fear him, had turned to foreign kings for aid.

How strange it seemed, that he, Rotath of the Moonstone and the Asphodel, sorcerer and magician, should be gasping out his breath on the marble floor, a victim to that most material of all threats–a keen pointed sword in a sinewy hand.

Rotath cursed the limitations of the flesh. He felt his brain crumbling and he cursed all the men of all the worlds. He cursed them by Hotath and Helgor, by Ra and Ka and Valka.

He cursed all men living and dead, and all the generations unborn for a million centuries to come, naming Vramma and Jaggta-noga and Kamma and

Kulthas. He cursed humanity by the fane of the Black Gods, the tracks of the Serpent Ones, the talons of the Ape Lords and the iron bound books of Shuma Gorath.

He cursed goodness and virtue and light, speaking the names of gods forgotten even by the priests of Lemuria. He invoked the dark monstrous shadows of the older worlds, and of those black suns which lurk forever behind the stars.

He felt the shades gather about him. He was going fast. And closing about him in an ever nearing ring, he sensed the tiger taloned devils who awaited his coming. He saw their bodies of solid jet and the great red caverns of their eyes. Behind hovered the white shadows of they who had died upon his altars, in horrid torment. Like mist in the moonlight they floated, great luminous eyes fixed on him in sad accusation, a never ending host.

Rotath feared, and fearing, his curses rose louder, his blasphemies grew more terrible. With one last wild passion of fury, he placed a curse on his own bones that they might bring death and horror to the sons of men. But even as he spoke he knew that years and ages would pass and his bones turn to dust in that forgotten shrine before any man’s foot disturbed its silence. So he mustered his fast waning powers for one last invocation to the dread beings he

had served, one last feat of magic. He uttered a blood-freezing formula, naming a terrible name.

And soon he felt mighty elemental powers set in motion. He felt his bones growing hard and brittle. A coldness transcending earthly coldness passed over him and he lay still. The leaves whispered and the silver god laughed with cold gemmed eyes.

★★★★★★★★★★

EMERALD INTERLUDE

Years stretched into centuries, centuries became ages. The green oceans rose and wrote an epic poem in emerald and the rhythm thereof was terrible. Thrones toppled and the silver trumpets fell silent forever. The races of men passed as smoke drifts from the breast of a summer. The roaring jade green seas engulfed the lands and all mountains sank, even the highest mountain of Lemuria.

★★★★★★★★★★★

ORCHIDS OF DEATH

A man thrust aside the trailing vines and stared. A heavy beard masked his face and mire slimed his boots. Above and about him hung the thick tropic jungle in breathless and exotic brooding. Orchids flamed and breathed about him.

Wonder was in his wide eyes. He gazed between shattered granite columns upon a crumbling marble floor. Vines twined thickly, like green serpents, among these columns and trailed their sinuous length across the floor. A curious idol, long fallen from a broken pedestal, lay upon the floor and stared up with red, unblinking eyes. The man noted the character of this corroded thing and a strong shudder shook him. He glanced unbelievingly again at the other thing which lay on the marble floor, and shrugged his

shoulders.

He entered the shrine. He gazed at the carvings on the bases of the sullen columns, wondering at their unholy and indescribable appearance. Over all the scent of the orchids hung like a heavy fog.

This small, rankly grown, swampy island was once the pinnacle of a great mountain, mused the man, and he wondered what strange people had reared up this fane–and left that monstrous thing lying before the fallen idol. He thought of the fame which his discoveries should bring him–of the acclaim of mighty universities and powerful scientific societies.

He bent above the skeleton on the floor, noting the inhumanly long finger bones, the curious formation of the feet; the deep cavern-like eye-sockets, the jutting frontal bone, the general appearance of the great domed skull, which differed so horribly from mankind as he knew it.

What long dead artizan had shaped the thing with such incredible skill? He bent closer, noting the rounded ball-and-socket of the joints, the slight depressions on flat surfaces where muscles had been attached. And he started as the stupendous truth was borne on him.

This was no work of human art–that skeleton had once been clothed in flesh and had walked and spoken and lived. And this was impossible, his reeling brain told him, for the bones were of solid gold.

The orchids nodded in the shadows of the trees. The shrine lay in purple and black shade. The man brooded above the bones and wondered. How could he know of an elder world sorcery great enough to serve undying hate, by lending that hate a concrete substance, impervious to Time’s destructions?

The man laid his hand on the golden skull. A sudden deathly shriek broke the silence. The man in the shrine reeled up, screaming, took a single staggering step and then fell headlong, to lie with writhing limbs on the vine-crossed marble floor.

The orchids showered down on him in a sensuous rain and his blind, clutching hands tore them into exotic fragments as he died. Silence fell and an adder crawled sluggishly from within the golden skull.

The Black City
(Unfinished Fragment)

The Black City
(Unfinished Fragment)

The cold eyes of Kull, king of Valusia, clouded with perplexity as they rested on the man who had so abruptly entered the royal presence and who now stood before the king, trembling with passion. Kull sighed; he knew the barbarians who served him, for was not he himself an Atlantean by birth? Brule, the Spear-slayer, bursting rudely into the king’s chamber, had torn from

his harness every emblem given him by Valusia and now stood bare of any sign to show that he was allied to the empire. And Kull knew the meaning of this gesture.

"Kull!" barked the Pict, pale with fury. "I will have justice!"

Again Kull sighed. There were times when peace and quiet were things to be desired and in Kamula he thought he had found them. Dreamy Kamula–even as he waited for the raging Pict to continue his tirade, Kull's thoughts drifted away and back along the lazy, dreamy days that had passed since his coming to this mountain city, this metropolis of pleasure, whose marble and lapis-lazuli palaces were built, tier upon gleaming tier, about the dome shaped hill that formed the city's center.

"My people have been allies of the empire for a thousand years!" The Pict made a swift, passionate gesture with his clenched fist. "Now, is it that one of my warriors can be snatched from under my nose, in the very palace of the king?"

Kull straightened with a start.

"What madness is this? What warrior? Who seized him?"

"That's for you to discover," growled the Pict. "One moment he was there, lounging against a marble column–the next–zut! He was gone with only a foul stench and a frightful scream for clue."

"Perhaps a jealous husband–" mused Kull.

Brule broke in rudely: "Grogar never looked at any woman–even of his own race. These Kamulians hate we Picts. I have read it in their looks."

Kull smiled. "You dream, Brule; these people are too indolent and pleasure loving to hate anyone. They love, they sing, they compose lyrics–I suppose you think Grogar was snatched away by the poet Taligaro, or the singing woman Zareta, or prince Mandara?"

"I care not!" snarled Brule. "But I tell you this, Kull, Grogar has spilt his blood like water for the empire, and he is my best chief of mounted bowmen. I will find him, alive or dead, if I have to tear Kamula apart, stone by stone! By Valka, I will feed this city to the flames and quench the flames in blood–"

Kull had risen from his chair.

"Take me to the place you last saw Grogar," he said, and Brule ceased his tirade and led the way sullenly. They passed out of the chamber through an inner door and proceeded down a winding corridor, side by side, as different in appearance as two men could well be, yet alike in the litheness of movement, the keenness of eye, the intangible wildness that proclaimed the barbarian.

Kull was tall, broad shouldered and deep chested–massive yet lithe. His face was brown from sun and wind, his square cut black hair like a lion's

mane, his grey eyes cold as a sword gleaming through fathoms of ice.

Brule was typical of his race–of medium height, built with the savage economy of a panther, and of skin much darker than the king's.

"We were in the Jeweled Room," grunted the Pict, "Grogar, Manaro and I. Grogar was leaning against a half-column set into the wall when he shifted his weight full against the wall–and vanished before our eyes! A panel swung inward and he was gone–and we had but a glimpse of black darkness within, and a loathsome scent flowed momentarily outward. But Manaro, standing beside Grogar, whipped out his sword in that instant and thrust the good blade into the opening, so the panel could not wholly close. We thrust against it, but it did not yield and I hasted after you, leaving Manaro holding his sword in the crack."

"And why did you tear off your Valusian emblems?" asked Kull.

"I was angry," growled the Spear-slayer sullenly, avoiding Kull's eye. The king nodded without reply. It was the natural, unreasoning action of an infuriated savage, to whom no natural enemy appears to be slashed and rent.

They entered the Jeweled Room, the further wall of which was set into the natural stone of the hill on which Kamula was built.

"Manaro swore he heard a whisper as of music," grunted Brule. "And there he leans with his ear at the crack. Hola–Manaro!"

Kull frowned as he saw the tall Valusian did not change his posture or give any heed to the hail. He did in truth lean against the panel, one hand gripping the sword which held the secret doorway apart, one ear glued to the thin crack. Kull noted the almost material darkness of that thin strip of blackness–it seemed to him that beyond that unknown opening, the darkness must lurk like a living, sentient thing.

He strode forward impatiently and clapped the soldier heavily on the shoulder. And Manaro rocked away from the wall and fell stiffly to lie at Kull's feet with horror glazed eyes staring blankly upward.

"Valka!" swore Brule. "He's been stabbed–I was a fool to leave him here alone–"

The king shook his lion-like head. "There's no blood on him–look at his face." Brule looked and cursed. The dead Valusian's features were set in a mask of horror–and the effect was distinctly one of *listening*.

Kull cautiously approached the crack in the wall and then beckoned Brule. From somewhere beyond that mysterious portal sounded a thin, wailing sound as of a ghostly piping. It was so dim as to barely be heard, but it held in its music all the hate and venom of a thousand demons. Kull shrugged his giant shoulders.

Untitled Fragment

Untitled Fragment

Three men sat at a table playing a game. Across the sill of an open window there whispered a faint breezing, blowing the filmy curtains about and bearing to the players the incense of roses and vines and growing green things.

Three men sat at a table–one was a king–one a prince of an ancient house–one was the chief of a terrible and barbaric nation.

“Score!” quoth Kull, king of Valusia, as he moved one of the ivory figures. “My wizard menaces your warrior, Brule.”

Brule nodded. He was not as large a man as the king, but he was firmly

knit, compactly yet lithely built. Kull was the tiger, Brule was the leopard. Brule was a Pict and dark like all his race. Immobile features set off a fine head, powerful neck, heavy trim shoulders and a deep chest. These features, with the muscular legs and arms, were characteristics of the nation to which he belonged. But in one respect Brule differed from his tribesmen, for whereas their eyes were mostly hard scintillant brown or wicked black, his were a deep volcanic blue. Somewhere in his blood was a vagrant strain of Celt or of those scattered savages who lived in ice caves close to the Arctic circle.

"A wizard is a hard man to beat, Kull," said this man. "In this game or in the real red game of battle–Well, there was once when my life hung on the balance of power between a Pictland wizard and me–he had his charms and I had a well forged blade–"

He paused to drink deeply from a crimson goblet which stood at his elbow.

"Tell us the tale, Brule," urged the third player. Ronaro, prince of the great atl Volante house, was a slim elegant young man with a splendid head, fine dark eyes and a keen intellectual face. He was the patrician–the highest type of intelligent aristocracy any land has ever produced. These other two in a way were his antithesis. He was born in a palace; of the others, one had been born in a wattle hut, the other in a cave. Ronaro traced his descent back two thousand years, through a line of dukes, knights, princes, statesmen, poets and kings. Brule could trace his ancestors vaguely for a few hundred years and he named among them skin clad chiefs, painted and feathered warriors, shamans with bison skull masks and finger bone necklaces–one or two island kings who held court in mud huts, and a legendary hero or two, semi-deified for feats of personal strength or whole sale murder. Kull did not know who his own parents were.

But in the countenances of all three gleamed an equality beyond the shackles of birth and circumstance–the aristocracy of the Man. These men were natural patricians, each in his own way. Ronaro's ancestors were kings; Brule's, skin-clad chiefs; Kull's might have been slaves or chieftains. But about each of the three was that indefinable something which sets the superior man apart and shatters the delusion that all men were born equal.

"Well," Brule's eyes filled with brooding reminiscence, "it happened in my early youth, yes, in my first war raid. Oh, I had killed a man or so in the fishing brawls and at the tribal feasts, but I had not yet been ornamented with the scars of the warrior clan–" he indicated his bare breast where the listeners saw three small horizontal marks, barely discernable in the sun bronze of the Pict's mighty chest.

Ronaro watched him with a never failing interest as he talked. These fierce barbarians with their primitive vitality and straightforwardness intrigued the young prince. Years in Valusia as one of the empire's strongest allies had wrought an outward change on the Pict–had not tamed him, but had given him a veneer of culture, education and reserve. But beneath that veneer burned the blind black savage of old. To a greater extent had this change worked on Kull, once warrior of Atlantis, now king of Valusia.

"You, Kull, and you, Ronaro," Brule said, "we of The Islands are all one blood, but of many tribes, and each tribe has customs and traditions peculiar to itself alone. We all acknowledge Nial of the Tatheli as over-king but his rule is loose. He does not interfere with our affairs among ourselves, nor does he levy tribute or taxes, as the Valusians call it, from any except the Nargi and the Dano and the Whale-slayers who live on the isle of Tathel with his own tribe. These he protects against other tribes and for that reason he collects toll. But he takes no toll of my tribe, the Borni, nor of any other tribe. Neither does he interfere when two tribes go to war–unless some tribe encroaches on the three who pay tribute. When the war is fought and won, he arbitrates the matter, and his judgment is final–what stolen women shall be returned, what payment of war canoes made, what blood price paid and so on. And when the Lemurians or the Celts or any foreign nation or band of reavers come against us, he sends forth for all tribes to put aside their quarrels and fight side by side. Which is a good thing. He might be a supreme tyrant if he liked, for his own tribe is very strong, and with the aid of Valusia he might do as he liked–but he knows that though he might, with his tribes and their allies, crush all the other tribes, there would never be peace again, but revolt as long as a Borni or a Sungara or a Wolf-slayer or any of the tribesmen was left alive.

By This Axe I Rule!

By This Axe I Rule!

I
“MY SONGS ARE NAILS FOR A KING’S COFFIN!”

“At midnight the king must die!”

The speaker was tall, lean and dark, and a crooked scar close to his mouth lent him an unusually sinister cast of countenance. His hearers nodded, their eyes glinting. There were four of these–one was a short fat man, with a timid face, weak mouth and eyes which bulged in an air of perpetual curiosity–another a great somber giant, hairy and primitive–the third a tall, wiry man in the garb of a jester whose flaming blue eyes flared with a light not wholly sane–and last a stocky dwarf of a man, inhumanly short and abnormally broad of shoulders and long of arms.

The first speaker smiled in a wintry sort of manner. “Let us take the vow, the oath that may not be broken–the Oath of the Dagger and the Flame. I trust you–oh, yes, of course. Still, it is better that there be assurance for all of us. I note tremors among some of you.”

“That is all very well for you to say, Ascalante,” broke in the short fat man. “You are an ostracized outlaw, anyway, with a price on your head–you have all to gain and nothing to lose, whereas we–”

“Have much to lose and more to gain,” answered the outlaw imperturbably. “You called me down out of my mountain fastnesses to aid you in overthrowing a king–I have made the plans, set the snare, baited the trap and stand ready to destroy the prey–but I must be sure of your support. Will you swear?”

“Enough of this foolishness!” cried the man with the blazing eyes. “Aye, we will swear this dawn and tonight we will dance down a king! ‘Oh, the chant of the chariots and the whir of the wings of the vultures–’”

“Save your songs for another time, Ridondo,” laughed Ascalante. “This is a time for daggers, not rhymes.”

“My songs are nails for a king’s coffin!” cried the minstrel, whipping out a long lean dagger. “Varlets, bring hither a candle! I shall be first to swear the oath!”

A silent and sombre slave brought a long taper and Ridondo pricked his wrist, bringing blood. One by one the other four followed his example, holding their wounded wrists carefully so that the blood should not drip yet. Then gripping hands in a sort of circle, with the lighted candle in the center, they turned their wrists so that the blood drops fell upon it. While it hissed and sizzled, they repeated:

“I, Ascalante, a landless man, swear the deed spoken and the silence covenanted, by the oath unbreakable!”

“And I, Ridondo, first minstrel of Valusia’s courts!” cried the minstrel.

“And I, Volmana, count of Karaban,” spoke the dwarf.

“And I, Gromel, commander of the Black Legion,” rumbled the giant.

“And I, Kaanuub, baron of Blaal,” quavered the short fat man, in a rather tremulous falsetto.

The candle sputtered and went out, quenched by the ruby drops which fell upon it.

“So fade the life of our enemy,” said Ascalante, releasing his comrades’ hands. He looked on them with carefully veiled contempt. The outlaw knew that oaths may be broken, even “unbreakable” ones, but he knew also that Kaanuub, of whom he was most distrustful, was superstitious. There was no use overlooking any safe guard, no matter how slight.

“Tomorrow,” said Ascalante abruptly, “I mean today, for it is dawn now, Brule the Spear-slayer, the king’s right hand man, departs from Grondar along with Ka-nu the Pictish ambassador, the Pictish escort and a goodly number of the Red Slayers, the king’s bodyguard.”

“Yes,” said Volmana with some satisfaction. “That was your plan, Ascalante, but I accomplished it. I have kin high in the counsel of Grondar and it was a simple matter to indirectly persuade the king of Grondar to request the presence of Ka-nu. And of course, as Kull honors Ka-nu above all others, he must have a sufficient escort.”

The outlaw nodded.

“Good. I have at last managed, through Gromel, to corrupt an officer of the Red Guard. This man will march his men away from the royal bedroom tonight just before midnight, on a pretext of investigating some suspicious noise or the like. The various sentries will have been disposed of. We will be waiting, we five, and sixteen desperate rogues of mine who I have summoned from the hills and who now hide in various parts of the city. Twenty-one against one–”

He laughed. Gromel nodded, Volmana grinned, Kaanuub turned pale; Ridondo smote his hands together and cried out ringingly:

“By Valka, they will remember this night, who strike the golden strings! The fall of the tyrant, the death of the despot–what songs I shall make!”

His eyes burned with a wild fanatical light and the others regarded him dubiously, all save Ascalante who bent his head to hide a grin. Then the outlaw rose suddenly.

“Enough! Get back to your places and not by word, deed or look do you betray what is in your minds.” He hesitated, eyeing Kaanuub. “Baron, your white face will betray you. If Kull comes to you and looks into your eyes with those icy grey eyes of his, you will collapse. Get you out to your country estate and wait until we send for you. Four are enough.”

Kaanuub almost collapsed then, from a reaction of joy; he left babbling incoherencies. The rest nodded to the outlaw and departed.

Ascalante stretched himself like a great cat and grinned. He called for a slave and one came, a somber evil looking fellow whose shoulders bore the scars of the brand that marks thieves.

“Tomorrow,” quoth Ascalante, taking the cup offered him, “I come into the open and let the people of Valusia feast their eyes upon me. For months now, ever since the Rebel Four summoned me from my mountains, I have been cooped in like a rat–living in the very heart of my enemies, hiding away from the light in the daytime, skulking masked through dark alleys and darker corridors at night. Yet I have accomplished what those rebellious lords could not. Working through them and through other agents, many of whom have never seen my face, I have honeycombed the empire with discontent and corruption. I have bribed and subverted officials, spread sedition among the people–in short, I, working in the shadows, have paved the downfall of the king who at the moment sits throned in the sun. Ah, my friend, I had almost forgotten that I was a statesman before I was an outlaw, until Kaanuub and Volmana sent for me.”

“You work with strange comrades,” said the slave.

“Weak men, but strong in their ways,” lazily answered the outlaw. “Volmana–a shrewd man, bold, audacious, with kin in high places–but poverty stricken, and his barren estates loaded with debts. Gromel–a ferocious beast, strong and brave as a lion, with considerable influence among the soldiers, but otherwise useless–lacking the necessary brains. Kaanuub, cunning in his low way and full of petty intrigue, but otherwise a fool and a coward–avaricious but possessed of immense wealth, which has been essential in my schemes. Ridondo, a mad poet, full of hare-brained schemes–brave but flighty. A prime favorite with the people because of his songs which

tear out their heart-strings. He is our best bid for popularity, once we have achieved our design. I am the power that has welded these men, useless without me."

"Who mounts the throne, then?"

"Kaanuub, of course–or so he thinks! He has a trace of royal blood in him–the old dynasty, the blood of that king whom Kull killed with his bare hands. A bad mistake of the present king. He knows there are men who still boast descent from the old dynasty but he lets them live. So Kaanuub plots for the throne. Volmana wishes to be reinstated in favor, as he was under the old regime, so that he may lift his estate and title to their former grandeur. Gromel hates Kelka, commander of the Red Slayers, and thinks he should have that position. He wishes to be commander of all Valusia's armies. As to Ridondo–bah! I despise the man and admire him at the same time. He is your true idealist. He sees in Kull, an outlander and a barbarian, merely a rough footed, red handed savage who has come out of the sea to invade a peaceful and pleasant land. He already idolizes the king Kull slew, forgetting the rogue's vile nature. He forgets the inhumanities under which the land groaned during his reign, and he is making the people forget. Already they sing 'The Lament for the King' in which Ridondo lauds the saintly villain and vilifies Kull as 'that black hearted savage'–Kull laughs at these songs and indulges Ridondo, but at the same time wonders why the people are turning against him."

"But why does Ridondo hate Kull?"

"Because he is a poet, and poets always hate those in power, and turn to dead ages for relief in dreams. Ridondo is a flaming torch of idealism and he sees himself as a hero, a stainless knight, which he is, rising to overthrow the tyrant."

"And you?"

Ascalante laughed and drained the goblet. "I have ideas of my own. Poets are dangerous things, because they believe what they sing–at the time. Well, I believe what I think. And I think Kaanuub will not hold the throne seat overlong. A few months ago I had lost all ambitions save to waste the villages and the caravans as long as I lived. Now, well–now we shall see."

II
"THEN I WAS THE LIBERATOR–*NOW–"*

A room strangely barren in contrast to the rich tapestries on the walls and the deep carpets on the floor. A small writing table, behind which sat a man. This man would have stood out in a crowd of a million. It was not so much because of his unusual size, his height and great shoulders, though these features lent to the general effect. But his face, dark and immobile, held the gaze and his narrow grey eyes beat down the wills of the onlookers by their icy magnetism. Each movement he made, no matter how slight, betokened steel spring muscles and brain knit to those muscles with perfect coordination. There was nothing deliberate or measured about his motions–either he was perfectly at rest–still as a bronze statue, or else he was in motion, with that cat-like quickness which blurred the sight that tried to follow his movements. Now this man rested his chin on his fists, his elbows on the writing table, and gloomily eyed the man who stood before him. This man was occupied in his own affairs at the moment, for he was tightening the laces of his breast-plate. Moreover he was abstractedly whistling–a strange and unconventional performance, considering that he was in the presence of a king.

"Brule," said the king, "this matter of statecraft wearies me as all the fighting I have done never did."

"A part of the game, Kull," answered Brule. "You are king–you must play the part."

"I wish that I might ride with you to Grondar," said Kull enviously. "It seems ages since I had a horse between my knees–but Tu says that affairs at home require my presence. Curse him!

"Months and months ago," he continued with increasing gloom, getting no answer and speaking with freedom, "I overthrew the old dynasty and seized the throne of Valusia–of which I had dreamed ever since I was a boy in the

land of my tribesmen. That was easy. Looking back now, over the long hard path I followed, all those days of toil, slaughter and tribulation seem like so many dreams. From a wild tribesman in Atlantis, I rose, passing through the galleys of Lemuria–a slave for two years at the oars–then an outlaw in the hills of Valusia–then a captive in her dungeons–a gladiator in her arenas–a soldier in her armies–a commander–a king!

"The trouble with me, Brule, I did not dream far enough. I always visualized merely the seizing of the throne–I did not look beyond. When king Borna lay dead beneath my feet, and I tore the crown from his gory head, I had reached the ultimate border of my dreams. From there, it has been a maze of illusions and mistakes. I prepared myself to seize the throne–not to hold it.

"When I overthrew Borna, *then* people hailed me wildly–*then* I was the Liberator–*now* they mutter and stare blackly behind my back–they spit at my shadow when they think I am not looking. They have put a statue of Borna, that dead swine, in the Temple of the Serpent and people go and wail before him, hailing him as a saintly monarch who was done to death by a red handed barbarian. When I led her armies to victory as a soldier, Valusia overlooked the fact that I was a foreigner–now she cannot forgive me.

"And now, in the Temple of the Serpent, there come to burn incense to Borna's memory, men whom his executioners blinded and maimed, fathers whose sons died in his dungeons, husbands whose wives were dragged into his seraglio–Bah! Men are all fools."

"Ridondo is largely responsible," answered the Pict, drawing his sword belt up another notch. "He sings songs that make men mad. Hang him in his jester's garb to the highest tower in the city. Let him make rhymes for the vultures."

Kull shook his lion head. "No, Brule, he is beyond my reach. A great poet is greater than any king. He hates me, yet I would have his friendship. His songs are mightier than my sceptre, for time and again he has near torn the heart from my breast when he chose to sing for me. I will die and be forgotten, his songs will live forever."

The Pict shrugged his shoulders. "As you like; you are still king, and the people cannot dislodge you. The Red Slayers are yours to a man, and you have all Pictland behind you. We are barbarians, together, even if we have spent most of our lives in this land. I go, now. You have naught to fear save an attempt at assassination, which is no fear at all, considering the fact that you are guarded night and day by a squad of the Red Slayers."

Kull lifted his hand in a gesture of farewell and the Pict clanked out the room.

Now another man wished his attention, reminding Kull that a king’s time was never his own.

This man was a young noble of the city, one Seno val Dor. This famous young swordsman and reprobate presented himself before the king with the plain evidence of much mental perturbation. His velvet cap was rumpled and as he dropped it to the floor when he kneeled, the plume drooped miserably. His gaudy clothing showed stains as if in his mental agony he had neglected his personal appearance for some time.

“King, lord king,” he said in tones of deep sincerity. “If the glorious record of my family means anything to your majesty, if my own fealty means anything, for Valka’s sake, grant my request.”

“Name it.”

“Lord king, I love a maiden–without her I cannot live. Without me, she must die. I cannot eat, I cannot sleep for thinking of her. Her beauty haunts me day and night–the radiant vision of her divine loveliness–”

Kull moved restlessly. He had never been a lover.

“Then in Valka’s name, marry her!”

“Ah,” cried the youth, “there’s the rub. She is a slave, Ala by name, belonging to one Volmana, count of Karaban. It is on the black books of Valusian law that a noble cannot marry a slave. It has always been so. I have moved high heaven and get only the same reply. ‘Noble and slave can never wed.’ It is fearful. They tell me that never in the history of the empire before has a nobleman wanted to marry a slave! What is that to me? I appeal to you as a last resort!”

“Will not this Volmana sell her?”

“He would, but that would hardly alter the case. She would still be a slave and a man cannot marry his own slave. Only as a wife I want her. Any other way would be hollow mockery. I want to show her to all the world, rigged out in the ermine and jewels of val Dor’s wife! But it cannot be, unless you can help me. She was born a slave, of a hundred generations of slaves, and slave she will be as long as she lives and her children after her. And as such she cannot marry a freeman.”

“Then go into slavery with her,” suggested Kull, eyeing the youth narrowly.

“This I desired,” answered Seno, so frankly that Kull instantly believed him. “I went to Volmana and said: ‘You have a slave whom I love; I wish to wed her. Take me, then, as your slave so that I may be ever near her.’ He refused with horror; he would sell me the girl, or give her to me but he would not consent to enslave me. And my father has sworn on the unbreakable oath to kill me if I should so degrade the name of val Dor as to go into slavery. No,

lord king, only you can help us."

Kull summoned Tu and laid the case before him. Tu, chief councillor, shook his head. "It is written in the great iron bound books, even as Seno has said. It has ever been the law, and it will always be the law. A noble may not mate with a slave."

"Why may I not change that law?" queried Kull.

Tu laid before him a tablet of stone whereon the law was engraved.

"For thousands of years this law has been–see, Kull, on the stone it was carved by the primal law makers, so many centuries ago a man might count all night and still not number them all. Neither you, nor any other king, may alter it."

Kull felt suddenly the sickening, weakening feeling of utter helplessness which had begun to assail him of late. Kingship was another form of slavery, it seemed to him–he had always won his way by carving a path through his enemies with his great sword–how could he prevail against solicitous and respectful friends who bowed and flattered and were adamant against anything new, or any change–who barricaded themselves and their customs with traditions and antiquity and quietly defied him to change–anything?

"Go," he said with a weary wave of his hand. "I am sorry. But I cannot help you."

Seno val Dor wandered out of the room, a broken man, if hanging head and bent shoulders, dull eyes and dragging steps mean anything.

III
"I THOUGHT YOU A HUMAN TIGER!"

A cool wind whispered through the green woodlands. A silver thread of a brook wound among great tree boles, whence hung large vines and gayly festooned creepers. A bird sang and the soft late summer sunlight was sifted

through the interlocking branches to fall in gold and black velvet patterns of shade and light on the grass covered earth. In the midst of this pastoral quietude, a little slave girl lay with her face between her soft white arms, and wept as if her little heart would break. The bird sang but she was deaf; the brook called her but she was dumb; the sun shone but she was blind–all the universe was a black void in which only pain and tears were real.

So she did not hear the light footfall nor see the tall broad shouldered man who came out of the bushes and stood above her. She was not aware of his presence until he knelt and lifted her, wiping her eyes with hands as gentle as a woman's.

The little slave girl looked into a dark immobile face, with cold narrow grey eyes which just now were strangely soft. She knew this man was not a Valusian from his appearance, and in these troublous times it was not a good thing for little slave girls to be caught in the lonely woods by strangers, especially foreigners, but she was too miserable to be afraid and besides the man looked kind.

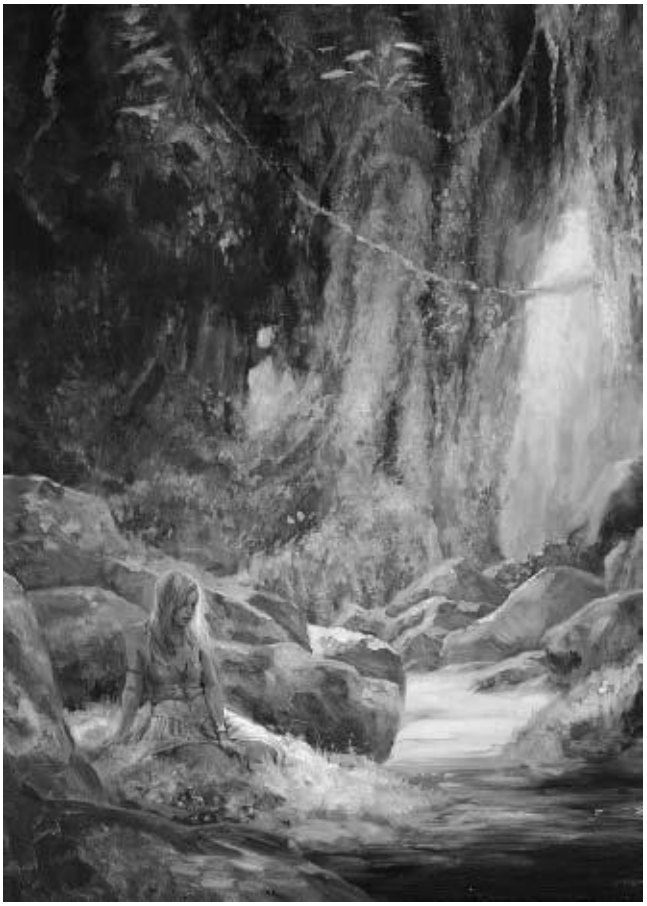
"What's the matter, child?" he asked and because a woman in extreme grief is likely to pour her sorrows out to anyone who shows interest and sympathy she whimpered: "Oh, sir, I am a miserable girl! I love a young nobleman–"

"Seno val Dor?"

"Yes, sir." She glanced at him in surprize. "How did you know? He wishes to marry me and today having striven in vain elsewhere for permission, he went to the king himself. But the king refused to aid him."

A shadow crossed the stranger's dark face. "Did Seno say the king refused?"

"No–the king summoned the chief councillor and argued with him awhile, but gave in. Oh," she sobbed, "I knew it would be useless! The laws of Valusia are unalterable! No matter how cruel or unjust! They are greater than the king."



The girl felt the muscles of the arms supporting her swell and harden into great iron cables. Across the stranger’s face passed a bleak and hopeless expression.

“Aye,” he muttered, half to himself, “the laws of Valusia are greater than the king.”

Telling her troubles had helped her a little and she dried her eyes. Little slave girls are used to troubles and to suffering, though this one had been unusually kindly used all her life.

“Does Seno hate the king?” asked the stranger.

She shook her head. “He realizes the king is helpless.”

“And you?”

“And I what?”

“Do you hate the king?”

Her eyes flared–shocked. “I! Oh sir, who am I, to hate the king? Why, why, I never thought of such a thing.”

“I am glad,” said the man heavily. “After all, little one, the king is only a slave like yourself, locked with heavier chains.”

“Poor man,” she said, pityingly though not exactly understanding, then she flamed into wrath. “But I do hate the cruel laws which the people follow!

Why should laws not change? Time never stands still! Why should people today be shackled by laws which were made for our barbarian ancestors thousands of years ago–" she stopped suddenly and looked fearfully about.

"Don't tell," she whispered, laying her head in an appealing manner on her companion's iron shoulder. "It is not fit that a woman, and a slave girl at that, should so unashamedly express herself on such public matters. I will be spanked if my mistress or my master hears of it!"

The big man smiled. "Be at ease, child. The king himself would not be offended at your sentiments; indeed I believe that he agrees with you."

"Have you seen the king?" she asked, her childish curiosity overcoming her misery for the moment.

"Often."

"And is he eight feet tall," she asked eagerly, "and has he horns under his crown, as the common people say?"

"Scarcely," he laughed. "He lacks nearly two feet of answering your description as regards height; as for size he might be my twin brother. There is not an inch difference in us."

"Is he as kind as you?"

"At times; when he is not goaded to frenzy by a statecraft which he cannot understand and by the vagaries of a people which can never understand him."

"Is he in truth a barbarian?"

"In very truth; he was born and spent his early boyhood among the heathen barbarians who inhabit the land of Atlantis. He dreamed a dream and fulfilled it. Because he was a great fighter and a savage swordsman, because he was crafty in actual battle, because the barbarian mercenaries in Valusian armies loved him, he became king. Because he is a warrior and not a politician, because his swordsmanship helps him now not at all, his throne is rocking beneath him."

"And he is very unhappy."

"Not all the time," smiled the big man. "Sometimes when he slips away alone and takes a few hours holiday by himself among the woods, he is almost happy. Especially when he meets a pretty girl like–"

The girl cried out in sudden terror, slipping to her knees before him: "Oh, sire, sire, have mercy! I did not know–you are the king!"

"Don't be afraid." Kull knelt beside her again and put an arm about her, feeling her trembling from head to foot. "You said I was kind–"

“And so you are, sire,” she whispered weakly. “I–I thought you were a human tiger, from what men said, but you are kind and tender–b-but–you are k-king and I–”

Suddenly in a very agony of confusion and embarrassment, she sprang up and fled, vanishing instantly. The overcoming realization that the king, whom she had only dreamed of seeing at a distance some day, was actually the man to whom she had told her pitiful woes, overcame her and filled her with an abasement and embarrassment which was an almost physical terror.

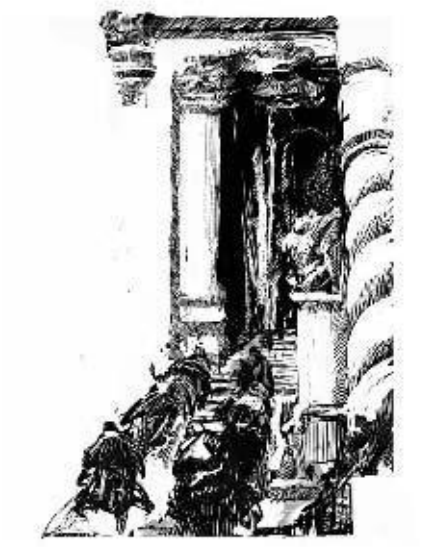
Kull sighed and rose. The affairs of the palace were calling him back and he must return and wrestle with problems concerning the nature of which he had only the vaguest idea and concerning the solving of which he had no idea at all.

IV
“WHO DIES FIRST?”

Through the utter silence which shrouded the corridors and halls of the

palace, twenty figures stole. Their stealthy feet, cased in soft leather shoes, made no sound either on thick carpet or bare marble tile. The torches which stood in niches along the halls gleamed redly on bared dagger, broad sword blade and keen edged axe.

“Easy, easy all!” hissed Ascalante, halting for a moment to glance back at his followers. “Stop that cursed loud breathing, whoever it is! The officer of the night guard has removed all the guards from these halls, either by direct order or by making them drunk, but we must be careful. Lucky it is for us that those cursed Picts–the lean wolves–are either revelling at the consulate or riding to Grondar. Hist! back–here come the guard!”



They crowded back behind a huge pillar which might have hidden a whole regiment of men, and waited. Almost immediately ten men swung by; tall brawny men, in red armor, who looked like iron statues. They were heavily armed and the faces of some showed a slight uncertainty. The officer who led them was rather pale. His face was set in hard lines and he lifted a hand to wipe sweat from his brow as the guard passed the pillar where the assassins hid. He was young and this betraying of a king came not easy to him.

They clanked by and passed on up the corridor.

“Good!” chuckled Ascalante. “He did as I bid; Kull sleeps unguarded! Haste, we have work to do! If they catch us killing him, we are undone, but a dead king is easy to make a mere memory. Haste!”

“Aye haste!” cried Ridondo.

They hurried down the corridor with reckless speed and stopped before a door.

“Here!” snapped Ascalante. “Gromel–break me open this door!”

The giant launched his mighty weight against the panel. Again–this time there was a rending of bolts, a crash of wood and the door staggered and burst inward.

“In!” shouted Ascalante, on fire with the spirit of murder.

“In!” roared Ridondo. “Death to the tyrant–”

They halted short–Kull faced them–not a naked Kull, roused out of deep sleep, mazed and unarmed to be butchered like a sheep, but a Kull wakeful and ferocious, partly clad in the armor of a Red Slayer, with a long sword in his hand.

Kull had risen quietly a few minutes before, unable to sleep. He had intended to ask the officer of the guard into his room to converse with him awhile, but on looking through the spy-hole of the door, had seen him leading his men off. To the suspicious brain of the barbarian king had leaped the assumption that he was being betrayed. He never thought of calling the men back, because they were supposedly in the plot too. There was no good reason for this desertion. So Kull had quietly and quickly donned the armor he kept at hand, nor had he completed this act when Gromel first hurtled against the door.

For a moment the tableau held–the four rebel noblemen at the door and the ten wild desperate outlaws crowding close behind them–held at bay by the terrible-eyed silent giant who stood in the middle of the royal bedroom, sword at the ready.

Then Ascalante shouted: “In! And slay him! He is one to twenty and he has no helmet!”

True; there had been lack of time to put on the helmet, nor was there now time to snatch the great shield from where it hung on the wall. Be that as it may, Kull was better protected than any of the assassins except Gromel and Volmana who were in full armor, with their vizors closed.

With a yell that rang to the roof, the killers flooded into the room. First of all was Gromel. He came in like a charging bull, head down, sword low for the disembowelling thrust. And Kull sprang to meet him like a tiger charging a bull, and all the king’s weight and mighty strength went into the arm that swung the sword. In a whistling arc the great blade flashed through the air to crash down on the commander’s helmet. Blade and helmet clashed and flew to pieces together and Gromel rolled lifeless on the floor, while Kull bounded back, gripping the bladeless hilt.

“Gromel!” he snarled as the shattered helmet disclosed the shattered head, then the rest of the pack were upon him. He felt a dagger point rake along his ribs and flung the wielder aside with a swing of his great left arm. He smashed his broken hilt square between another’s eyes and dropped him

senseless and bleeding to the floor.

“Watch the door, four of you!” screamed Ascalante, dancing about the edge of that whirlpool of singing steel, for he feared Kull, with his great weight and speed, might smash through their midst and escape. Four rogues drew back and ranged themselves before the single door. And in that instant Kull leaped to the wall and tore there from an ancient battle axe which had hung there for possibly a hundred years.

Back to the wall he faced them for a moment, then leaped among them. No defensive fighter was Kull! He always carried the fight to the enemy. A sweep of the axe dropped an outlaw to the floor with a severed shoulder–the terrible back-hand stroke crushed the skull of another. A sword shattered against his breast-plate–else he had died. His concern was to protect his uncovered head and the spaces between breast plate and back plate–for Valusian armor was intricate and he had had no time to fully arm himself. Already he was bleeding from wounds on the cheek and the arms and legs, but so swift and deadly he was, and so much the fighter that even with the odds so greatly on their side, the assassins hesitated to leave an opening. Moreover their own numbers hampered them.

For one moment they crowded him savagely, raining blows, then they gave back and ringed him, thrusting and parrying–a couple of corpses on the floor gave mute evidence of the unwisdom of their first plan.

“Knaves!” screamed Ridondo in a rage, flinging off his slouch cap, his wild eyes glaring. “Do ye shrink from the combat? Shall the despot live? Out on it!”

He rushed in, thrusting viciously; but Kull, recognizing him, shattered his sword with a tremendous short chop and, with a push, sent him reeling back to sprawl on the floor. The king took in his left arm the sword of Ascalante and the outlaw only saved his life by ducking Kull’s axe and bounding backward. One of the hairy bandits dived at Kull’s legs hoping to bring him down in that manner, but after wrestling for a brief instant at what seemed a solid iron tower, he glanced up just in time to see the axe falling, but not in time to avoid it. In the interim one of his comrades had lifted a sword with both hands and hewed downward with such downright sincerity that he cut through Kull’s shoulder plate on the left side, and wounded the shoulder beneath. In an instant the king’s breast plate was full of blood.

Volmana, flinging the attackers to right and left in his savage impatience, came ploughing through and hacked savagely at Kull’s unprotected head. Kull ducked and the sword whistled above, shaving off a lock of hair–ducking the blows of a dwarf like Volmana is difficult for a man of Kull’s height.

Kull pivoted on his heel and struck from the side, as a wolf might leap, in

a wide level arc–Volmana dropped with his whole left side caved in and the lungs gushing forth.

“Volmana!” Kull spoke the word rather breathlessly. “I’d know that dwarf in Hell–”

He straightened to defend himself from the maddened rush of Ridondo who charged in wild and wide open, armed only with a dagger. Kull leaped back, axe high.

“Ridondo!” his voice rang sharply. “Back! I would not harm you–”

“Die, tyrant!” screamed the mad minstrel, hurling himself headlong on the king. Kull delayed the blow he was loath to deliver until it was too late. Only when he felt the bite of steel in his unprotected side did he strike, in a frenzy of blind desperation.

Ridondo dropped with a shattered skull and Kull reeled back against the wall, blood spurting through the fingers which gripped his wounded side.

“In, now, and get him!” yelled Ascalante, preparing to lead the attack.

Kull placed his back to the wall and lifted his axe. He made a terrible and primordial picture. Legs braced far apart, head thrust forward, one red hand clutching at the wall for support, the other gripping the axe on high, while the ferocious features were frozen in a death snarl of hate, and the icy eyes blazed through the mist of blood which veiled them. The men hesitated; the tiger might be dying but he was still capable of dealing death.

“Who dies first?” snarled Kull through smashed and bloody lips.

Ascalante leaped as a wolf leaps–halted almost in mid-air with the unbelievable speed which characterized him, and fell prostrate to avoid the death that was hissing toward him in the form of a red axe. He frantically whirled his feet out of the way and rolled clear just as Kull recovered from his missed blow and struck again–this time the axe sank four inches into the polished wood floor close to Ascalante's revolving legs.

Another desperado rushed at this instant, followed half heartedly by his fellows. The first villain had figured on reaching Kull and killing him before he could get his axe out of the floor, but he miscalculated the king's speed, or else he started his rush a second too late. At any rate the axe lurched up and crashed down and the rush halted abruptly as a reddened caricature of a man was catapulted back against their legs.

At that moment a hurried clanking of feet sounded down the hall and the rogues in the door raised a shout: "Soldiers coming!"

Ascalante cursed and his men deserted him like rats leaving a sinking ship. They rushed out into the hall–or limped, splattering blood–and down the corridor a hue and cry was raised, and pursuit started.

Save for the dead and dying men on the floor, Kull and Ascalante stood alone in the royal bed room.

Kull’s knees were buckling and he leaned heavily against the wall, watching the outlaw with the eyes of a dying wolf.

“All seems to be lost, particularly honor,” he murmured. “However the king is dying on his feet–and–” whatever other cogitation might have passed through his mind is not known for at that moment he ran lightly at Kull just as the king was employing his axe arm to wipe the blood from his half blind eyes. A man with a sword at the ready can thrust quicker than a wounded man out of position can strike with an axe that weighs his weary arm like lead.

But even as Ascalante began his thrust, Seno val Dor appeared at the door and flung something through the air which glittered, sang and ended its flight in Ascalante’s throat. The outlaw staggered, dropped his sword and sank to the floor at Kull’s feet, flooding them with the flow of a severed jugular–mute witness that Seno’s war-skill included knife throwing as well. Kull looked down bewilderedly at the dead outlaw and Ascalante’s dead eyes stared back in seeming mockery, as if the owner still maintained the futility of kings and outlaws, of plots and counter-plots.

Then Seno was supporting the king, the room was flooded with men-at-arms in the uniform of the great val Dor family and Kull realized that a little slave girl was holding his other arm.

“Kull, Kull, are you dead?” val Dor’s face was very white.

“Not yet,” the king spoke huskily. “Staunch this wound in my left side–if I die ’twill be from it; ’tis deep but the rest are not mortal–Ridondo wrote me a deathly song there! Cram stuff into it for the present–I have work to do.”

They obeyed wonderingly and as the flow of blood ceased, Kull though literally bled white already, felt some slight access of strength. The palace was fully aroused now. Court ladies, lords, men-at-arms, councillors, all

swarmed about the place babbling. The Red Slayers were gathering, wild with rage, ready for anything, jealous of the fact that others had aided their king. Of the young officer who had commanded the door guard, he had slipped away in the darkness and neither then nor later was he in evidence, though earnestly sought after.

Kull, still keeping stubbornly to his feet, grasping his bloody axe with one hand and Seno's shoulder with another singled out Tu, who stood wringing his hands and ordered: "Bring me the tablet whereon is engraved the law concerning slaves."

"But lord king–"

"Do as I say!" howled Kull, lifting the axe and Tu scurried to obey.

As he waited and the court women flocked about him, dressing his wounds and trying gently but vainly to pry his iron fingers from about the bloody axe handle, Kull heard Seno's breathless tale.

"–Ala heard Kaanuub and Volmana plotting–she had stolen into a little nook to cry over her–our troubles, and Kaanuub came, on his way to his country estate. He was shaking with terror for fear plans might go awry and he made Volmana go over the plot with him again before he left, so he might know there was no flaw in it.

"He did not leave until it was late, and then Ala stole away and came to me. But it is a long way from Volmana's city house to the house of val Dor, a long way for a little girl to walk, and though I gathered my men and came instantly, we almost arrived too late."

Kull gripped his shoulder.

"I will not forget."

Tu entered with the law tablet, laying it reverently on the table.

Kull shouldered aside all who stood near him and stood up alone.

"Hear, people of Valusia," he exclaimed, upheld by the wild beast vitality which was his, fired from within by a strength which was more than physical. "I stand here–the king. I am wounded almost unto death, but I have survived mass wounds.

"Hear you! I am weary of this business! I am no king but a slave! I am hemmed in by laws, laws, laws! I cannot punish malefactors nor reward my friends because of law–custom–tradition! By Valka, I will be king in fact as well as in name!

"Here stand the two who have saved my life! Henceforward they are free to marry, to do as they like!"

Seno and Ala rushed into each others' arms with a glad cry.

"But the law!" screamed Tu.

"I am the law!" roared Kull, swinging up his axe; it flashed downward and

the stone tablet flew into a hundred pieces. The people clenched their hands in horror, waiting dumbly for the sky to fall.

Kull reeled back, eyes blazing. The room whirled to his dizzy gaze.

“I am king, state and law!” he roared, and seizing the wand-like sceptre which lay near, he broke it in two and flung it from him. “This shall be my sceptre!” The red axe was brandished aloft, splashing the pallid nobles with drops of blood. Kull gripped the slender crown with his left hand and placed his back against the wall. Only that support kept him from falling but in his arms was still the strength of lions.

“I am either king or corpse!” he roared, his corded muscles bulging, his terrible eyes blazing. “If you like not my kingship–come and take this crown!”

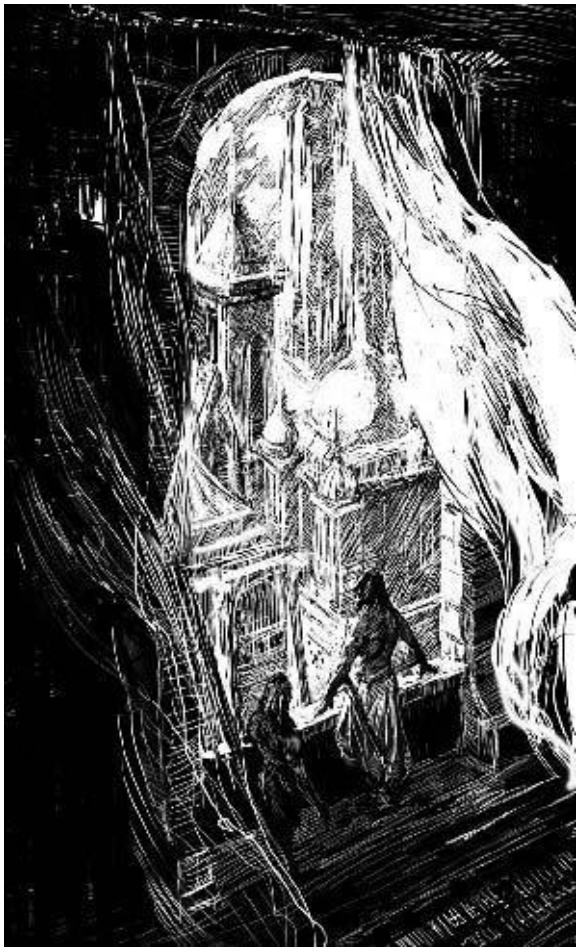
The corded left arm held out the crown, the right gripping the menacing axe above it.

“By this axe I rule! This is my sceptre! I have struggled and sweated to be the puppet king you wished me to be–to king it your way. Now I use mine own way! If you will not fight, you shall obey! Laws that are just shall stand; laws that have outlived their times I shall shatter as I shattered that one! *I am king!*”

Slowly the pale faced noblemen and frightened women knelt, bowing in fear and reverence to the blood stained giant who towered above them with his eyes ablaze.

“I am king!”

Swords of the Purple Kingdom



Swords of the Purple Kingdom

I
VALUSIA PLOTS BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

A sinister quiet lay like a shroud over the ancient city of Valusia. The heat

waves danced from roof to shining roof and shimmered against the smooth marble walls. The purple towers and golden spires were softened in the faint haze. No ringing hoofs on the wide paved streets broke the drowsy silence and the few pedestrians who appeared walking, did what they had to do hastily and vanished indoors again. The city seemed like a realm of ghosts.

Kull, king of Valusia, drew aside the filmy curtains and gazed over the golden window sill, out over the court with its sparkling fountains and trim hedges and pruned trees, over the high wall and at the blank windows of houses which met his glance.

"All Valusia plots behind closed doors, Brule," he grunted.

His companion, a dark faced, powerful warrior of medium height grinned hardly: "You are too suspicious, Kull. The heat drives most of them indoors."

"But they plot," reiterated Kull. He was a tall broad shouldered barbarian, the true fighting build–wide shoulders, mighty chest and lean flanks. Under heavy black brows his cold grey eyes brooded. His features betrayed his birth for Kull the usurper was an Atlantean.

"True, they plot. When did the people ever fail to plot, no matter who held the throne? And they might be excused now, Kull."

"Aye," the giant's brow clouded, "I am an alien. The first barbarian to press the Valusian throne since the beginning of time. When I was a commander of her forces they overlooked the accident of my birth. Now–they hurl it into my teeth–by looks and thoughts, at least."

"What do you care? I am an alien also. Aliens rule Valusia now, since the people have grown too weak and degenerate to rule themselves. An Atlantean sits on her throne, backed by all the Picts, the empire's most ancient and powerful allies; her court is filled with foreigners, her armies with barbarian mercenaries–and the Red Slayers–well, they are at least Valusians, but they are men of the mountains who look upon themselves almost as a different race."

Kull shrugged his shoulders restlessly.

"I know what the people think, and with what aversion and anger the powerful old Valusian families must look on the state of affairs. But what would you have? The empire was worse under Borna, a native Valusian and a direct heir of the old dynasty, than it has been under me. This is the price a nation must pay for decaying–the strong young people come in and take possession, one way or another. I have at least rebuilt the armies, organized the mercenaries and restored Valusia to a measure of her former international greatness. Surely it is better to have one barbarian on the throne, holding the crumbling bands together, than to have a hundred thousand riding red handed through the city streets. Which is what would have happened by now, had it

been left to king Borna. The kingdom was splitting under his feet; invasions threatening on all sides, the heathen Grondarians were ready to launch a raid of appalling magnitude–

"Well, I killed Borna with my bare hands that wild night when we rode at the head of the rebels. That bit of ruthlessness won me some enemies, but within six months I had put down anarchy and all counter rebellions, had welded the nation back into one piece, had broken the back of the Triple Federation and crushed the power of the Grondarians–well, now Valusia dozes in peace and quiet, and between naps, plots my overthrow. There has been no famine since my reign, the store houses are bulging with grain, the trading ships ride heavy with cargo, the merchants' purses are full, the people are fat bellied–but still they murmur and curse and spit on my shadow. What do they want?"

The Pict grinned savagely and with bitter mirth. "Another Borna! A red handed tyrant! Forget their ingratitude. You did not seize the kingdom for their sakes, nor do you hold it for their benefit. Well, you have accomplished a life long ambition and you are firmly seated on the throne. Let them murmur and plot. You are king!"

Kull nodded grimly. "I am king of this purple kingdom! And until my breath stops and my ghost goes down the long Shadow road, I will be king! What now?"

A slave bowed deeply: "Delcartes, daughter of the great house of bora Ballin, desires audience, most high majesty!"

A shadow crossed the king's brow. "More supplication in regard to her damnable love affair!" he sighed to Brule. "Mayhap you'd better go." To the slave, "Let her enter the presence."

Kull sat in a chair padded with velvet and gazed at Delcartes. She was only some nineteen years of age, and clad in the costly but scanty fashion of Valusian noble ladies, she presented a ravishing picture, the beauty of which even the barbarian king could appreciate. Her skin was a marvelous white, due partly to many baths in milk and wine, but mainly a part of her heritage of loveliness. Her cheeks were tinted naturally with a delicate pink and her lips were full and red. Under delicate black brows brooded a pair of deep soft eyes, dark as mystery, and the whole picture was set off by a mass of curly black silky hair which was partly confined by a slim golden band.

Delcartes knelt at the feet of the king and clasping his sword-hardened fingers in her soft slim hands, she looked up into his eyes, her own eyes luminous and pensive with appeal. Of all the people in the kingdom, Kull preferred not to look in the eyes of Delcartes. He saw there at times a depth of allure and mystery, of which he knew not even herself was aware. She knew something of her powers, this spoiled and pampered child of aristocracy, but her full powers she little guessed, because of her extreme youth. But Kull who was wise in the ways of men and of women, realized with some uneasiness that with maturity, Delcartes was bound to become a terrific power in the court and the land, either for good or bad.

“But your majesty,” she was wailing now, like a child begging for a toy. “Please let me marry Dalgar of Farsun! He has become a Valusian citizen, he is high in favor at court, as you say yourself, then why–”

“I have told you,” said the king with patience. “It is nothing to me whether you marry Dalgar, Brule or the devil! But your father does not wish you to marry this Farsunian adventurer and–”

“But you can make him let me!” she cried.

“The house of bora Ballin I number among my staunchest supporters,” answered the Atlantean, “and Goron bora Ballin, your father, among my closest friends. When I was a friendless gladiator he befriended me. He lent me money when I was a common soldier, and he espoused my cause when I struck for the throne. Not to save this right hand of mine would I force him into an action to which he is so violently opposed, or interfere in his family affairs.”

Delcartes had not yet learned that some men cannot be moved by feminine wiles. She pleaded, coaxed and pouted. She kissed Kull’s hands, wept on his mighty breast, perched on his knee and argued, all much to his embarrassment–but without avail. Kull was sincerely sympathetic but adamant. To all her appeals and blandishments he had one answer: that it was none of his business, that her father knew better what she needed and that he, Kull, was not going to interfere.

At last Delcartes gave it up as a bad job and left the presence with bowed head and dragging steps. As she emerged from the royal chamber, she met her father coming in. Goron bora Ballin, guessing his daughter's purpose in visiting the king, said nothing to her, but the look he gave her spoke eloquently of spankings to come. The girl climbed miserably into her sedan chair, feeling as if her load was too heavy for any one girl to bear. Then her deeper nature asserted itself. Her dark eyes smoldered with rebellion and she spoke a few quick words to the slaves who carried her chair.

Count Goron stood before his king meanwhile, and his features were frozen into a mask of formal deference. Kull noted that expression and it hurt him. Formality existed between himself and all his subjects and allies except the Pict, Brule, and the ambassador Kananu, but this studied formality was a new thing in Count Goron of the bora Ballin and Kull guessed at the reason.

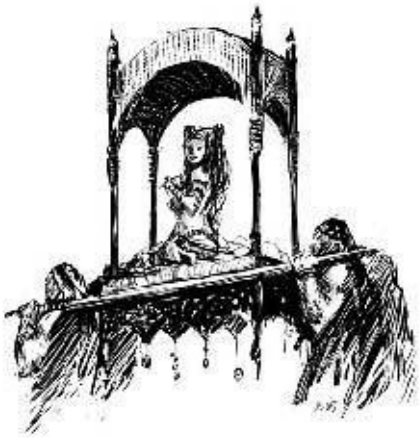
"Your daughter was here, Count," said he abruptly.

"Yes, your majesty." The tone was impassive and respectful.

"You probably know why. She wants to marry Dalgar of Farsun."

The Count made a stately inclination of his head. "If your majesty so wishes, he has but to say the word." His features froze into harder lines.

Kull, stung, rose and strode across the chamber to the window, where once again he gazed out at the drowsing city. Without turning he said: "Not for half my kingdom would I interfere with your family affairs, nor force you into a course unpleasant to you."



The Count was at his side in an instant, his formality vanished, his fine eyes eloquent: “Your majesty, I have wronged you in my thoughts–I should have known–” He made as if to kneel but Kull restrained him.

The king grinned. “Be at ease, Count. Your private affairs are your own. I cannot help you, but you can help me. There is conspiracy in the air; I smell danger as in my early youth I sensed the nearness of a tiger in the jungle or a serpent in the high grass.”

“My spies have been combing the city, your majesty,” said the Count, his eyes kindling at the prospect of action. “The people murmur as they will murmur under any ruler–but–I have recently come from Kananu at the consulate and he told me to warn you that outside influence and foreign money were at work. He said he knew nothing definite, but his Picts wormed some information from a drunken servant of the Verulian ambassador–vague hints at some coup of treachery that government is planning.”

Kull grunted. “Verulian trickery is a by-word. But Gen Dala the Verulian ambassador is the soul of honor.”

“So much better a figure head; if he knows nothing of what his nation plans, so much the better will he serve as a mask for their doings.”

“But what would Verulia gain?” asked Kull.

“Gomlah, a distant cousin of king Borna, took refuge there when you overthrew the old dynasty. With you slain, Valusia would fall to pieces. Her armies would become disorganized, all her allies except the Picts would desert her, the mercenaries whom only you can control would turn against her, and she would be an easy prey for the first powerful nation who might move against her. Then, with Gomlah as an excuse for invasion, as a puppet on Valusia’s throne–”

“I see,” grunted Kull. “I am better at battle than in council but I see. So–the first step must be my removal, eh?”

“Yes, your majesty.”

Kull smiled and flexed his mighty arms. “After all, this kinging it grows dull at times.” His fingers caressed the hilt of the great sword which he wore at all times.

“Tu, chief councillor to the king, and Dondal, his nephew,” sang out a slave, and two men entered the presence.

Tu, chief councillor, was a portly man of medium height and late middle life, who looked more like a merchant than a councillor. His hair was thin and sparse, his face lined and on his brow rested a look of perpetual suspicion. Tu’s years and honors rested heavily on him. Originally of plebian birth, he had won his way by sheer power of craft and intrigue. He had seen three kings come and go before Kull, and the strain told on him.

His nephew Dondal was a slim, foppish youth with keen dark eyes and a pleasant smile. His chief virtue lay in the fact that he kept a discreet tongue in his head and never repeated what he heard at court. For this reason he was admitted into places not even warranted by his close kinship to Tu.

“Just a small matter of state, your majesty,” said Tu. “This permit for a new harbor on the Western coast. Will your majesty sign?”

Kull sighed his name, Tu drew from inside his bosom a signet ring attached to a small chain which he wore around his neck, and affixed the seal. This ring was the royal signature, in effect. No other ring in the world was exactly like it, and Tu wore it about his neck, waking or sleeping. Outside those in the royal chamber at the moment, not four men in the world knew where the ring was kept.

II
MYSTERY

The quiet of the day had merged almost imperceptibly into the quiet of night. The moon had not yet risen and the small silver star points gave little light, as if their radiance was strangled by the heat which still rose from the earth.

Along a deserted street a single horse's hoofs clanged hollowly. If eyes watched from the blank windows, they gave no sign that betrayed that anyone knew Dalgar of Farsun was riding through the night and the silence.

The young Farsunian was fully armed, his lithe athletic body completely encased in light armor, and a morion on his head. He looked capable of handling the long, slim, jewel hilted sword at his side and the scarf which crossed his steel clad breast with its red rose detracted nothing from the picture of manhood which he presented.

Now as he rode he glanced at a crumpled note in his hand, which half unfolded disclosed the following message in the characters of Valusia: "At midnight, my beloved, in the Accursed Gardens beyond the walls. We will fly together."

A dramatic note, dramatically worded; even Dalgar's handsome lips curved slightly as he read. Well, a little melodrama was pardonable in a young girl, and the youth enjoyed a touch himself. A thrill of ecstasy shook him at the thought of that rendezvous–by dawn he would be far across the Verulian border with his bride to be–then let Count Goron bora Ballin rave–let the whole Valusian army follow their track. With that much start he and Delcartes would be in safety. He felt high and romantic; his young brave heart swelled with the foolish heroics of youth. It was hours until midnight but–he nudged his horse with an armored heel and turned aside to take a short cut through some dark narrow streets.

“Oh silver moon and a silver breast–” he hummed under his breath the flaming love songs of the mad, dead poet Ridondo–then his horse snorted and shied. In the shadow of a squalid doorway, a dark bulk moved and groaned.

Drawing his sword, Dalgar slipped from the saddle and bent over he who groaned.

Bending very close he made out the form of a man. He dragged the body into a comparatively lighter area, noting that he was still breathing. Something wet and warm and sticky adhered to his hand.

The man was portly and apparently old, since his hair was thin and sparse, and his beard was shot with white. He was clad in the rags of a beggar but even in the darkness Dalgar could tell that his hands were soft and white under their grime. A nasty gash on the side of his head seeped blood, and his eyes were closed. He groaned from time to time.

Dalgar tore a piece from his sash to staunch the wound and in doing so, a ring on his finger became entangled in the unkempt beard. He jerked impatiently–the beard came away entirely, disclosing the smooth shaven, deeply lined face of a man in late middle life. Dalgar cried out and recoiled. He bounded to his feet, shaken to the roots of his foundation–bewildered and shocked. A moment he stood, staring down at the groaning man, then the quick rattle of hoofs on a parallel street recalled him to life.

He ran down a side alley and accosted the rider. This man pulled up with a quick motion, reaching for his sword as he did so. The steel shod hoofs of his steed struck fire from the flagstones as the horse set back on his haunches.

“What now? Oh, it’s you Dalgar?”

“Brule!” cried the young Farsunian. “Quick! Tu, the chief councillor lies in yonder street, senseless–mayhap murdered!”

The Pict was off his horse in an instant, sword flashing into his hand. He

flung the reins over his mount's head and left the steed standing there like a statue while he followed Dalgar on a run.

Together they bent over the stricken councillor while Brule ran an experienced hand over him.

"No fracture, apparently," grunted the Pict. "Can't tell for sure, of course. Was his beard off when you found him?"

"No, I pulled it off accidentally–"

"Then likely this is the work of some thug who knew him not. I'd rather think that. If the man who struck him down knew he was Tu, there's black treachery brewing in Valusia. I told him he'd come to grief, prowling around the city disguised this way–but you cannot tell a councillor anything. He insisted that in this manner he learned all that was going on–kept his finger on the empire's pulse, as he said."

"But if it were a cutthroat," said Dalgar. "Why did they not rob him? Here is his purse with a few copper coins in it–and who would seek to rob a beggar?"

The Sword-slayer swore. "Right. But who in Valka's name could know he was Tu? He never wore the same disguise twice and only Dondal and a slave helped him with it–and what did they want, whoever struck him down? Oh, well, Valka–he'll die while we stand jabbering. Help me get him on my horse."

With the chief councillor lolling drunkenly in the saddle, upheld by Brule's steel sinewed arms, they clattered through the streets to the palace. They were admitted by a wondering guard, and the senseless man was carried to an inner chamber and laid on a couch, where he was showing signs of recovering consciousness, under the ministrations of the slaves and court women.

At last he sat up and gripped his head groaning. Kananu, Pictish ambassador and the craftiest man in the kingdom, bent over him.

"Tu! Who smote you?"

"I don't know," the councillor was still dazed. "I remember nothing."

"Had you any documents of importance about you?"

"No."

"Did they take anything from you?"

Tu began fumbling at his garments uncertainly; his clouded eyes began to clear, then flared in sudden apprehension: "The ring! The royal signet ring! It is gone!"

Kananu smote his fist into his palm and cursed soulfully.

"This comes of carrying the thing with you! I warned you! Quick, Brule, Kelka–Dalgar–foul treason is afoot! Haste to the king's chamber!"

In front of the royal bed chamber ten of the Red Slayers, men of the king's favorite regiment, stood at guard. To Kananu's staccato questions, they answered that the king had retired an hour or so ago, that no one had sought entrance, that they had heard no sound.

Kananu knocked on the door. There was no response. In a panic he pushed against the door. It was locked from within.

"Break that door down!" he screamed, his face white, his voice unnatural with unaccustomed strain.

Two of the Red Slayers, giants in size, hurled their full weight against the door, but of heavy oak, braced by bronze bands, it held. Brule pushed them away and attacked the massive portal with his sword. Under the heavy blows of the keen edge, wood and metal gave way and in a few moments Brule shouldered through the shreds and splinters and rushed into the room. He halted short with a stifled cry and glaring over his shoulder Kananu clutched wildly at his beard. The royal bed was mussed as if it had been slept in, but of the king there was no sign. The room was empty and only the open window gave hint of any clue.

"Sweep the streets!" roared Kananu. "Comb the city! Guard all the gates! Kelka, rouse out the full force of the Red Slayers! Brule, gather your horsemen and ride them all to death if necessary! Haste! Dalgar–"

But the Farsunian was gone. He had suddenly remembered that the hour of midnight approached and of far more importance to him than the whereabouts of any king, was the fact that Delcartes bora Ballin was awaiting him in the Accursed Gardens two miles beyond the city wall.

III
THE SIGN OF THE SEAL

That night Kull had retired early. As was his custom, he halted outside the door of the royal bedchamber for a few minutes to chat with the guard, his old regimental mates, and exchange a reminiscence or so of the old days when he had ridden in the ranks of the Red Slayers. Then, dismissing all his attendants, he entered the chamber, flung back the covers of his bed and prepared to retire. Strange proceedings for a king, no doubt, but Kull had been long used to the rough life of a soldier and before that he had been a savage tribesman. He had never gotten used to having things done for him and in the privacy of his bed chamber, he would at least attend to himself.

But just as he turned to extinguish the great candle which illuminated his room, he heard a slight tapping at the window sill. Hand on sword, he crossed the room with the easy silent tread of a great panther and looked out. The window opened on the inner grounds of the palace, and the hedges and trees loomed vaguely in the semi darkness of the starlight. Fountains glimmered vaguely and he could not make out the forms of any of the sentries who paced those confines.

But here at his elbow was Mystery. Clinging to the vines which covered the wall, was a small wizened fellow who looked much like the professional beggars which swarmed the more sordid of the city’s streets. He seemed harmless, with his thin limbs and monkey face, but Kull regarded him with a

scowl.

“I see I shall have to plant sentries at the very foot of my window, or tear these vines down,” said the king. “How did you get through the lines?”

The wizened one put his skinny finger across puckered lips for silence, then with a simian like dexterity, slid a hand over the sill through the bars into the room. There he silently handed Kull a piece of parchment. The king unrolled it and read: “King Kull: if you value your life, or the welfare of the kingdom, follow this guide to the place where he shall lead you. Tell no one. Let yourself be not seen by the guards. The regiments are honeycombed with treason and if you are to live and hold the throne, you must do exactly as I say. Trust the bearer of this note implicitly.” It was signed “Tu, Chief Councillor of Valusia” and was sealed with the royal signet ring.

Kull knit his black brows. The thing had an unsavory look–but this was Tu’s hand writing–he noted the peculiar, almost imperceptible quirk in the last letter of Tu’s name, which was the councillor’s trade mark, so to speak. And then the sign of the seal, the seal which could not be duplicated–Kull sighed.

“Very well,” he said. “Wait until I arm myself.”

Dressed and clad in light chain mail armor, Kull turned again to the window. He gripped the bars, one in each hand, and cautiously exerting his

superhuman strength, felt them give until even his broad shoulders could slip between them. Clambering out he caught the vines and swung down them with as much ease as was displayed by the small beggar who preceded them.

At the foot of the wall, Kull caught his companion's arm.

"How did you elude the guard?" he whispered.

"To such as accosted me, I showed the sign of the royal seal."

"That will scarcely answer now," grunted the king. "Follow me; I know their routine."

Some twenty minutes followed, of lying in wait behind a hedge or tree until a sentry passed, of dodging quickly into the shadows and making short stealthy dashes–at last they came to the outer wall. Kull took his guide by the ankles and lifted him until his fingers clutched the top of the wall. Once astride, the beggar reached down a hand to aid the king, but Kull, with a contemptuous gesture, backed off a few paces, took a short run and bounding high in the air, caught the parapet with one upflung hand, swinging his great form up across the wall top with an almost incredible display of strength and agility.

The next instant the two strangely incongruous figures had dropped down on the opposite side and faded into the gloom.

IV
"HERE I STAND AT BAY!"

Delcartes, daughter of the house of bora Ballin, was nervous and frightened. Upheld by her high hopes and her sincere love, she did not regret her rash actions of the last few hours, but she earnestly wished for the coming of midnight and her lover.

Up to the present, her escapade had been easy. It was not easy for any one to leave the city after night fall, but she had ridden away from her father's house just before sundown, telling her mother that she was going to spend the night with a girl friend of hers–well for her that women were allowed unusual freedom in the city of Valusia, and were not kept hemmed in in seraglios and veritable prison houses as they were in the Eastern empires; a habit which survived the Flood.

Delcartes had ridden boldly through the Eastern gate, and then made directly for the Accursed Gardens, two miles east of the city. These Gardens had once been the pleasure resort and country estate of a great nobleman, but tales of grim debauches and ghastly rites of devil worship began to get

abroad, and finally the people, maddened by the regular disappearance of their children, had descended on the Gardens in a frenzied mob, and had hanged the bad prince to his own portals. Combing the Gardens, the people had found strange foul things, and in a flood of repulsion and horror, had partially destroyed the mansion and the summer houses, the arbors, the grottoes and the walls. But built of imperishable marble, many of the buildings had resisted both the sledges of the mob and the corrosion of time. Now, deserted for a hundred years, a miniature jungle had sprung up within the crumbling walls and the rank vegetation overran the ruins.

Delcartes concealed her steed in a ruined summer house and seating herself on the cracked marble floor, settled herself to wait. At first it was not bad. The gentle summer sunset flooded the land, softening all scenes with its mellow gold. The green sea about her, shot with white gleams which were marble walls and crumbling roofs, intrigued her. But as night fell and the shadows merged, Delcartes grew nervous. The night wind whispered grisly things through the branches and the broad palm leaves and the tall grasses and the stars seemed cold and far away. Legends and tales came back to her, and she fancied that above the throb of her pounding heart, she could hear the rustle of unseen black wings, and the mutter of fiendish voices.

She prayed for midnight and Dalgar. Had Kull seen her then, he would not have thought of her strange deep nature, nor the signs of her great future; he would have seen only a frightened little girl who passionately desired to be taken up and coddled.

But the thought of leaving never entered her mind.

Time seemed as if it would never pass, but pass it did somehow. At last a faint glow betrayed the rising of the moon, and she knew the hour was close to midnight.

Then suddenly there came a sound which brought her to her feet, her heart flying into her throat. Somewhere in the supposedly deserted Gardens there crashed into the silence a shout and a clang of steel. A short hideous scream chilled the blood in her veins, then silence fell in a suffocating shroud.

Dalgar–Dalgar! The thought beat like a hammer in her dazed brain. Her lover had come and had fallen foul of some one–or something–men *or–?*

She stole from her hiding place, one hand over her heart which seemed about to burst through her ribs. She stole along a broken pave, and the whispering palm leaves brushed against her like ghostly fingers. About her lay a pulsating gulf of shadows, vibrant and alive with nameless evil. There was no sound.

Ahead of her loomed the ruined mansion; then without a sound two men stepped into her path. She screamed once, then her tongue froze with terror.

She tried to flee but her legs would not work and before she could move, one of the men had caught her up and tucked her under his arm as if she were a tiny child.

“A woman,” he growled in a language which Delcartes barely understood, and recognized as Verulian. “Lend me your dagger and I’ll–”

“We haven’t time now,” interposed the other, speaking in the Valusian tongue. “Toss her in there with him, and we’ll finish them both together. We must get Gonda here, before we kill him–he wants to question him a little.”

“Small use,” rumbled the Verulian giant, striding after his companion. “He won’t talk–I can tell you that–he’s opened his mouth only to curse us, since we captured him.”

Delcartes, tucked ignominiously under her captor’s arm, was frozen with fear, but her mind was working. Who was this “him” they were going to question and then kill? The thought that it must be Dalgar drove her own fear from her mind, and flooded her soul with a wild and desperate rage. She began to kick and struggle violently and was punished with a resounding smack which brought tears to her eyes and a cry of pain to her lips. She lapsed into a humiliated submission and was presently tossed unceremoniously through a shadowed doorway, to sprawl in a disheveled heap on the floor.

“Hadn’t we better tie her?” queried the giant.

“What use? She can’t escape. And she can’t untie *him*. Hurry up; we’ve got work to do.”

Delcartes sat up and looked timidly about. She was in a small chamber the corners of which were screened with spider webs. Dust was deep on the floor, and fragments of marble from the crumbling walls littered it. Part of the roof or ceiling was gone, and the slowly rising moon poured light through the aperture. By its light she saw a form on the floor, close to the wall. She shrank back, her teeth sinking into her lip with horrified anticipation, then she saw with a delirious sensation of relief that the man was too large to be Dalgar.

She crawled over to him and looked into his face. He was bound hand and foot and gagged; above the gag, two cold grey eyes looked up into hers. Eyes in which cold flame danced, like a volcano gleaming under fathoms of grey ice.

“King Kull!” Delcartes pressed both hands against her temples while the room reeled to her shocked and astounded gaze. The next instant her slim strong fingers were at work on the gag. A few minutes of agonized effort and it came free. Kull stretched his powerful jaws and swore in his own language, considerate, even in that moment, of the girl’s tender ears.

“Oh my lord, how came you here?” the girl was wringing her hands.

“Either my most trusted councillor is a traitor or I am a madman!” growled the giant. “One came to me with a letter in Tu’s hand writing, bearing even the royal seal. I followed him, as instructed, through the city and to a gate the existence of which I had never known. This gate was unguarded and apparently unknown to any but they who plotted against me. Outside the gate one awaited us with horses and we came full speed to these damnable Gardens. At the outer edge we left the horses, and I was led, like a blind dumb fool for sacrifice, into this ruined mansion.

“As I came through the door, a great man-net fell on me, entangling my sword arm, and binding my limbs, and a dozen great rogues sprang on me. Well, mayhap my taking was not so easy as they had thought. Two of them were swinging on my already encumbered right arm so I could not use my sword, but I kicked one in the side and felt his ribs give way, and bursting some of the net’s strands with my left hand, I gored another with my dagger. He had his death thereby and screamed like a lost soul as he gave up the ghost.

“But by Valka, there were too many of them. At last they had me stripped of my armor”–Delcartes saw the king wore only a sort of loin cloth–“and bound as you see me. The devil himself could not break these strands–no, scant use to try to untie the knots. One of the men was a seaman and I know of old the sort of knots they tie! I was a galley slave once, you know.”

“But what can I do?” wailed the girl, wringing her hands.

“Take a heavy piece of marble and flake off a sharp sliver,” said Kull swiftly. “You must cut these ropes–”

She did as she was bid and was rewarded with a long thin piece of stone, the concave edge of which was as keen as a razor with a jagged edge.

“I fear I will cut your skin, sire,” she apologized as she began work.

“Cut skin, flesh and bone, but get me free!” snarled Kull, his ferocious eyes blazing. “Trapped like a blind fool! Oh, imbecile that I am! Valka, Honan and Hotath! But let me get my hands on the rogues–how came you

here?”

“Let us talk of that later,” said Delcartes rather breathlessly. “Just now there is time for haste.”

Silence fell as the girl sawed at the stubborn strands giving no heed to her own tender hands which were soon lacerated and bleeding. Slowly, strand by strand the cords gave way; but there was still enough to hold the ordinary man helpless, when a heavy step sounded outside the door.

Delcartes froze. A voice spoke: “He is within, Gonda, bound and gagged and helpless. With him some Valusian wench that we caught wandering about the Garden.”

“Then be on watch for some gallant,” spoke another voice, a harsh, grating one, as the tone of a man accustomed to being obeyed. “Likely she was to meet some fop here. You–”

“No names, no names, good Gonda,” broke in a silky Valusian voice. “Remember our agreement–until Gomlah mounts the throne, I am simply–the Masked One.”

“Very good,” grunted the Verulian. “You have done a good night’s work, Masked One. None but you could have done it, for of us all only you knew how to obtain the royal signet. Only you could so closely counterfeit Tu’s writing–by the way, did you kill the old fellow?”

“What matter? Tonight, or the day Gomlah mounts the throne–he dies. The matter is that the king lies helpless in our power.”

Kull was racking his brain to remember–whose voice was that of the traitor? The voice was familiar but he could not place it. And Gonda–his face grew grim. A deep conspiracy indeed, if Verulia must send the commander of her royal armies to do her foul work. The king knew Gonda well, and had aforetime entertained him in the palace.

“Go in and bring him out,” said Gonda. “We will take him to the old torture chamber. I have questions to ask of him.”

The door opened admitting one man; the giant who had captured Delcartes. The door closed behind him and he crossed the room, giving scarcely a glance to the girl who cowered in a corner. He bent over the bound king, took him by leg and shoulder to lift him bodily–there came a sudden loud snap, as Kull, throwing all his iron strength into one convulsive wrench, broke the remaining strands which bound him.

He had not been tied long enough for all circulation to be cut off and his strength affected. As a python strikes his hands shot to the giant's throat–shot, and gripped like a steel vise.

The giant went to his knees. One hand flew to the iron fingers at his throat, the other to his dagger. His fingers sank like steel into Kull's wrist, the dagger flashed from its sheath–then his eyes bulged, his tongue sagged out. The fingers fell away from the king's wrist, and the dagger slipped from a nerveless grip. The Verulian went limp, his throat literally crushed in that terrible grip. Kull, with one terrific wrench, broke his neck and releasing him, tore the sword from its sheath. Delcartes had picked up the dagger.

The whole combat had taken only a few flashing seconds and had caused no more noise than might have resulted from a man lifting and shouldering a great weight.

"Hasten!" called Gonda's voice impatiently from the door, and Kull, crouching tiger-like just inside, thought quickly. He knew that there were at least a score of conspirators in the Gardens. He knew also, from the sound of the voices, that there were only two or three outside the door at the moment. This room was not a good place to defend. In a moment they would be coming in to see what was the delay. He reached a decision and acted promptly.

He beckoned the girl. "As soon as I have gone through the door, run out likewise and run up the stairs which lead away to the left." She nodded trembling and he patted her slim shoulders reassuringly. Then he whirled and flung open the door.

To the men outside, expecting the Verulian giant with the helpless king on his shoulders, appeared an apparition which was dumfounding in its unexpectedness. Kull stood in the door; Kull, half naked, crouched like a great human tiger, his teeth bared in the moonlight in a snarl of battle fury, his terrible eyes blazing–the long blade whirling like a wheel of silver in the moon.

Kull saw Gonda, two Verulian soldiers, a slim figure in a black mask–a flashing instant and then he was among them and the dance of death was on. The Verulian commander went down in the king's first lunge, his head cleft to the teeth, in spite of his helmet. The Masked One drew and thrust, his point raking Kull's cheek; one of the soldiers drove at the king with a spear, was parried and the next instant lay dead across his master. The other soldier broke and ran, hallooing lustily for his comrades. The Masked One retreated swiftly before the headlong attack of the king, parrying and guarding with an almost uncanny skill. He had no time to launch an attack of his own; before the whirlwind ferocity of Kull's charge he had only time for defense. Kull beat against his blade like a blacksmith on an anvil, and again and again it seemed as though the long Verulian steel must inevitably cleave that masked and hooded head, but always the long slim Valusian sword was in the way, turning the blow by an inch or stopping it within a hair's breadth of the skin, but always just enough.

Then Kull saw the Verulian soldiers running through the foliage and heard the clang of their weapons and their fierce shouts. Caught here in the open, they would get behind him and spit him like a rat. He slashed once more, viciously, at the retreating Valusian, and then backing away, turned and ran fleetly up the stairs, at the top of which Delcartes already stood.

There he turned at bay. He and the girl stood on a sort of artificial promontory. A stair led up and a stair had once led down the other way, but now the back stair had long since crumbled to decay. Kull saw that they were in a cul-de-sac. There was no escape, for on each side was a sheer wall some fifty feet in height. These walls were cut deep with ornate carvings but–"Well," thought Kull, "here we die. But here many others die, too."

The Verulians were gathering at the foot of the stair, under the leadership of the mysterious masked Valusian. The bell rang then. Kull took a fresh grip on his sword hilt and flung back his head–an unconscious reversion to days when he had worn a lion like mane of hair. A wild freedom swept over him and he laughed with such ringing joy that the soldiers at the foot of the stairs stared up at him, gaping.

Kull had never feared death; he did not fear it now; except for one consideration, he would have welcomed the clamor and madness of battle as an old friend, without regrets–this consideration was the girl who stood beside him. As he looked at her trembling form and white face, he reached a sudden decision. For a moment he struggled with himself. And to those to whom it seems a slight thing, the sacrifice he planned, let them reflect that Kull was an Atlantean; that all his life he had expected to die gloriously in battle. That his race looked on any other death as the ultimate disgrace. Yet now this man,

who was king of Valusia and more than king, raised his hand and shouted: “Ho, men of Verulia! Here I stand at bay. Many shall fall before I die. But promise me to release the girl, unharmed, and I will not lift a hand. You may kill me then like a sheep.”

Delcartes cried out in protest and the Masked One laughed: “We make no bargains with one already doomed. The girl also must die and I make no promises to break. Up, warriors, and take him!”

They flooded the stair like a black wave of death, swords sparkling frosty silver in the moonlight. One was far in advance of his fellows, a huge warrior who bore on high a great battle axe. Moving quicker than Kull had anticipated, this man was on the landing in an instant it seemed. Kull rushed in and the axe descended. Kull caught the heavy shaft with his left hand and checked the rush of the weapon in mid-air–a feat few men could have done–and at the same time struck in from the side with his right, a sweeping hammer-like blow which sent the long sword crunching through armor, muscle and bone, and left the broken blade wedged in the spinal column.

At the same instant then, he released the useless hilt and tore the axe from the nerveless grasp of the dying warrior who pitched back down the stairs. And Kull laughed shortly and grimly.

The Verulians hesitated on the stair and below the Masked One savagely urged them on. They were inclined to be rebellious.

“Gonda is dead,” shouted one. “Shall we take orders from this Valusian? This is a devil and not a man, who faces us! Let us save ourselves!”

“Fools!” the Masked One’s voice rose in a ferine shriek. “Don’t you see that your only safety lies in slaying the king? If you fail tonight your own government will repudiate you and will aid the Valusians in hunting you down! Up fools, you will die, some of you, but better for a few to die under the king’s axe, than for all to die on the gibbet! Let one man retreat down these stairs–that man will I kill!” And the long slender sword menaced them.

Desperate, afraid of their leader and recognizing the truth of his words, the score or more warriors turned their breasts to Kull’s steel. As they massed for what must necessarily be the last charge, Delcartes’ attention was attracted by a movement at the base of the wall. A shadow detached itself from the shadows and moved up the sheer face of the wall, climbing like an ape and using the deep carvings for foot and hand holds. This side of the wall was in shadow and she could not make out the features of the man, more especially as he wore a heavy morion which shaded his face.

Saying nothing to Kull who stood at the landing, his axe poised, she stole over to the edge of the wall, half concealing herself behind a ruin of what had once been a parapet. Now she could see that the man was in full armor but

still she could not make out his features. Her breath came fast and she raised the dagger, fighting fiercely to overcome a tendency of nausea.

Now a steel clad arm looked up over the edge–now she sprang quick and silent as a tigress and struck full at the unprotected face upturned suddenly in the moonlight. And even as the dagger fell and she was unable to check the blow, she screamed, wild and agonized. For in that fleeting second she recognized the face of her lover, Dalgar of Farsun.

V
THE BATTLE OF THE STAIRS.

Dalgar, after unceremoniously leaving the distracted presence of Kananu, got him to horse and rode hard to the Eastern gate. He had heard Kananu give orders to close the gates and let no one out, and he rode like a madman to beat that order. It was a hard matter to get out at night anyhow, and Dalgar having learned that the gates were not guarded tonight by the incorruptible Red Slayers, had planned to bribe his way out. Now he depended on the audacity of his scheme.

All in a lather of sweat, he halted at the Eastern gate and shouted: “Unbolt the gate! I must ride to the Verulian border tonight! Quick! The king has vanished! Let me through and then guard the gate! Let no one follow me! In the name of the king!”

Then as the soldier hesitated: “Haste, fools! The king may be in mortal danger! Hark!”

Far out across the city, chilling hearts with sudden nameless dread, sounded the deep tones of the great bronze Bell of the King which booms only when the king is in peril. The guards were electrified.

They knew Dalgar was high in favor as a visiting noble. They believed what he said. Under the impetuous blast of his will, they swung the great iron gates wide and he shot through like a thunder bolt, to vanish instantly in the

outer darkness.

As Dalgar rode, he hoped no great harm had come to Kull, for he liked the bluff barbarian far more than he had ever liked any of the polished, sophisticated and bloodless kings of the Seven Empires. Had it been possible, he would have aided in the search. But Delcartes was waiting for him and already he was late.

As the young nobleman entered the Garden, he had a peculiar feeling, that here in the heart of desolation and loneliness, there were many men. An instant later he heard a clash of steel, the sound of many footsteps running, and a fierce shouting in a foreign tongue. Slipping off his horse and drawing his sword, he crept through the underbrush until he came in sight of the ruined mansion. There a strange sight burst upon his astounded vision. At the top of the crumbling stair case stood a half naked, blood stained giant whom he recognized as the king of Valusia. By his side stood a girl–a cry burst from Dalgar's lips, half stifled! Delcartes! His nails bit into the palms of his clenching hand. Who were those men in dark clothing who swarmed up the stairs? No matter. They meant death to the girl and to Kull. He heard the king challenge them and offer his life for Delcartes' and a flood of gratitude swelled into his throat, nearly strangling him. Then he noted the deep carvings on the wall nearest him. The next instant he was climbing–to die by the side of the king, protecting the girl he loved.

He had lost sight of Delcartes and now as he climbed he dared not take the time to look up for her. This was a slippery and treacherous task. He did not see her until he caught hold of the edge to pull himself up–till he heard her scream and saw her hand falling toward his face gripping a gleam of silver. He ducked and took the blow on his morion; the dagger snapped at the hilt and Delcartes collapsed in his arms the next moment.

Kull had whirled, axe high, at her scream–now he paused. He recognized the Farsunian and even in that instant he read between the lines, knew why the couple was here, and grinned with real enjoyment.

A second the charge had halted, as the Verulians had noted the second man on the landing; now they came on again, bounding up the steps in the moonlight, blades aflame, eyes wild with desperation. Kull met the first with an overhand smash that crushed helmet and skull, then Dalgar was at his side and his blade licked out and into a Verulian throat. Then began the battle of the stair, since immortalized by singers and poets.

Kull was there to die and to slay before he died. He gave scant thought to defense. His axe played a wheel of death about him and with each blow there came a crunch of steel and bone, a spurt of blood, a gurgling cry of agony. Bodies choked the wide stair, but still the survivors came, clambering over the

gory forms of their comrades.

Dalgar had little opportunity to thrust or cut. He had seen in an instant that his best task lay in protecting Kull, who was a born slaughter machine, but who, in his armorless condition was likely to fall any instant.

So Dalgar wove a web of steel about the king, bringing into play all the sword skill that was his. Again and again his flashing blade turned a point from Kull's heart; again and again his mail clad forearm intercepted a blow that else had killed. Twice he took on his own helmet slashes meant for the king's bare head.

It is not easy to guard another man and yourself at the same time. Kull was bleeding from cuts on the face and breast, from a gash above the temple, a stab in the thigh, and a deep wound in the left shoulder; a thrusting pike had rent Dalgar's cuirass and wounded him in the side, and he felt his strength ebbing. A last mad effort of their foes and the Farsunian was overthrown. He fell at Kull's feet and a dozen points prodded for his life. With a lion like roar Kull cleared a space with one mighty sweep of that red axe and stood astride the fallen youth. They closed in–

There burst on Kull's ears a crash of horses' hoofs and the Accursed Gardens were flooded with wild riders, yelling like wolves in the moonlight. A storm of arrows swept the stairs and men howled, pitching headlong to lie still, or to tear gibbering at the cruel, deeply imbedded shafts. The few whom Kull's axe and the arrows had left fled down the stairs to be met at the bottom by the whistling curved swords of Brule's Picts. And there they died, fighting to the last, those bold Verulian warriors–catspaws for their falseking, sent out on a dangerous and foul mission, disowned by the men who sent them out, and branded forever with infamy. But they died like men.

But one did not die there at the foot of the stairs. The Masked One had fled at the first sound of hoofs, and now he shot across the Gardens riding a superb horse. He had almost reached the outer wall when Brule, the Spear-slayer, chief of the Picts, dashed across his path. There on the promontory, leaning on his bloody axe, Kull saw them fight beneath the moon.

The Masked One had abandoned his defensive tactics. He charged the Pict with reckless courage and the Spear-slayer met him, horse to horse, man to man, blade to blade. Both were magnificent horsemen. Their steeds, obeying the touch of the bridle, the nudge of the knee, whirled, reared and spun. But through all their motions, the whistling blades never lost touch of each other. Brule, differently from his tribesmen, used the slim straight sword of Valusia. In reach and speed there was little to choose between them, and Kull watching again and again caught his breath and bit his lip as it seemed Brule would fall before an unusually vicious thrust.

No crude hacking and slashing for these seasoned warriors. They thrust and countered, parried and thrust again. Then suddenly Brule seemed to lose touch with his opponent's blade–he parried wildly and wide, leaving himself wide open–the Masked One struck heels into his horse's sides as he lunged, so that the sword and the horse shot forward as one. Brule leaned aside, let the blade glance from the side of his cuirass–his own blade shot straight out, elbow, wrist, hilt and point making a straight line from his shoulder; the horses crashed together and together they rolled headlong on the sward. But from that tangle of lashing hoofs Brule rose unharmed and there in the high grass lay the Masked One, Brule's sword still transfixing him.

Kull awoke as from a trance; the Picts were howling about him like wolves, but he raised his hand for silence. "Enough! You are all heroes! But attend to Dalgar–he is sorely wounded. And when you have finished, you might see to my own wounds. Brule, how came you to find me?"

Brule beckoned Kull to where he stood above the dead Masked One.

"A beggar crone saw you climb the palace wall, and out of curiosity watched where you went. She followed you and saw you go through the forgotten gate. I was riding the plain between the wall and these Gardens when I heard the clash of steel. But look–who can this be?"

"Raise the mask," said Kull. "Whoever it is, it is he who copied Tu's handwriting, who took the signet ring from Tu–and–"

Brule tore the mask away.

"Dondal!" Kull ejaculated. "Tu's nephew! Brule, Tu must never know this. Let him think that Dondal rode with you and died fighting for his king!"

Brule seemed stunned: "Dondal! A traitor! Why, many a time I've drunk wine with him and slept it off in one of his beds."

Kull nodded. “I liked Dondal.”

Brule cleansed his blade and drove it home in the scabbard with a vicious clank. “Want will make a rogue of any man,” he said moodily. “He was deep in debt–Tu was penurious with him. Always maintained that giving young men money was bad for them. Dondal was forced to keep up appearances for his pride’s sake and so fell into the hands of the usurers. Thus Tu is the greater traitor for he drove the boy into treachery by his parsimony–and I could wish Tu’s heart had stopped my point instead of his.”

So saying, with a vicious snap of his teeth, the Pict turned on his heel and strode somberly away.

Kull turned back to Dalgar who lay half senseless while the Pictish warriors dressed his wounds with experienced fingers. Others attended to the king, and while they staunched, cleansed and bandaged, Delcartes came up to Kull with the mystery of the moon in her dark eyes.

“Sire,” she held out her small hands, now torn and stained with dried blood. “Will you now not have mercy on us–grant my plea if–” her throat caught on a sob–“if Dalgar lives?”

Kull caught her slim shoulders and shook her in his agony of spirit.

“Girl, girl, girl! Ask me anything except something I cannot grant. Ask half my kingdom, or my right hand and it is yours. I will ask Goron to let you marry Dalgar–I will beg him–but I cannot force him.”

Tall horsemen were gathering through the Gardens whose resplendent armor shone among the half naked wolfish Picts. A tall man hurried up, throwing back the vizor of his helmet.

“Father!”

Goron bora Ballin crushed his daughter to his breast with a sob of thanksgiving, and then turned to his king.

“Sire, you are sorely wounded!”

Kull shook his head. “Not sorely–not at least for me, though other men might feel stiff and sore. But yonder lies he who took the death thrusts meant for me; who was my shield and my helmet, and but for whom Valusia had howled for a new king.”

Goron whirled toward the prostrate youth.

“Dalgar! Is he dead?”

“Nigh unto it,” growled a wiry Pict who was still working above him. “But he is steel and whalebone; with any care he should live.”

“He came here to meet your daughter and elope with her,” said Kull while Delcartes hung her head. “He crept through the brush and saw me fighting for my life and hers, atop yonder stair. He might have escaped. Nothing barred him. But he climbed the sheer wall to certain death, as it seemed then, and

fought by my side as gayly as he ever rode to a feast–he not even a subject of mine by birth.”

Goron’s hands clenched and unclenched. His eyes kindled and softened as they bent on his daughter.

“Delcartes,” he said softly, drawing the girl into the shelter of his steel clad arm. “Do you still wish to marry this wild reckless youth?”

Her eyes spoke eloquently enough.

Kull was speaking: “Take him up carefully; bear him to the palace; he shall have the best–”

Goron interposed: “Sire, if I may ask–let him be taken to my castle. There the finest physicians shall attend him and on his recovery–well, if it be your royal pleasure, might we not celebrate the event with a wedding?”

Delcartes screamed with joy, clapped her hands, kissed her father and Kull and was off to Dalgar’s side like a whirlwind.

Goron smiled softly, his aristocratic face lighted.

“Out of a night of blood and terror, joy and happiness are born.”

The barbarian king grinned and shouldered his stained and notched axe.

“Life is that way, Count; one man’s bane is another’s bliss.”

The King and the Oak

The King and the Oak

Before the shadows slew the sun the kites were soaring free,
And Kull rode down the forest road, his red sword at his knee;
And winds were whispering round the world: “King Kull rides to the sea.”

The sun died crimson in the sea, the long grey shadows fell;
The moon rose like a silver skull that wrought a demon’s spell,
For in its light great trees stood up like specters out of Hell.

In spectral light the trees stood up, inhuman monsters dim;
Kull thought each trunk a living shape, each branch a knotted limb,
And strange unmortal evil eyes flamed horribly at him.

The branches writhed like knotted snakes, they beat against the night,
And one great oak with swayings stiff, horrific in his sight,
Tore up its roots and blocked his way, grim in the ghostly light.

They grappled in the forest way, the king and grisly oak;
Its great limbs bent him in their grip, but never a word was spoke;
And futile in his iron hand, the stabbing dagger broke.

And through the tossing, monstrous trees there sang a dim refrain
Fraught deep with twice a million years of evil, hate and pain:
“We were the lords ere man had come, and shall be lords again.”

Kull sensed an empire strange and old that bowed to man’s advance
As kingdoms of the grassblades bow before the marching ants,
And horror gripped him; in the dawn like someone in a trance

He strove with bloody hands against a still and silent tree;
As from a nightmare dream he woke; a wind blew down the lea
And Kull of high Atlantis rode silent to the sea.

Kings of the Night

Kings of the Night

The Caesar lolled on his ivory throne–
His iron legions came
To break a king in a land unknown,
And a race without a name.

–The Song of Bran

The dagger flashed downward. A sharp cry broke in a gasp. The form on the rough altar twitched convulsively and lay still. The jagged flint edge sawed at the crimsoned breast, and thin bony fingers, ghastly dyed, tore out the still twitching heart. Under matted white brows, sharp eyes gleamed with a ferocious intensity.

Besides the slayer, four men stood about the crude pile of stones that formed the altar of the God of Shadows. One was of medium height, lithely built, scantily clad, whose black hair was confined by a narrow iron band in the center of which gleamed a single red jewel. Of the others, two were dark like the first. But where he was lithe, they were stocky and misshapen, with knotted limbs, and tangled hair falling over sloping brows. His face denoted intelligence and implacable will; theirs merely a beast-like ferocity. The fourth man had little in common with the rest. Nearly a head taller, though his hair was black as theirs, his skin was comparatively light and he was gray-eyed. He eyed the proceedings with little favor.

And, in truth, Cormac of Connacht was little at ease. The Druids of his own isle of Erin had strange dark rites of worship, but nothing like this. Dark trees shut in this grim scene, lit by a single torch. Through the branches moaned an eery night-wind. Cormac was alone among men of a strange race and he had just seen the heart of a man ripped from his still pulsing body. Now the ancient priest, who looked scarcely human, was glaring at the throbbing thing. Cormac shuddered, glancing at him who wore the jewel. Did Bran Mak Morn, king of the Picts, believe that this white-bearded old butcher could foretell events by scanning a bleeding human heart? The dark eyes of the king were inscrutable. There were strange depths to the man that Cormac

could not fathom, nor any other man.

“The portents are good!” exclaimed the priest wildly, speaking more to the two chieftains than to Bran. “Here from the pulsing heart of a captive Roman I read–defeat for the arms of Rome! Triumph for the sons of the heather!”

The two savages murmured beneath their breath, their fierce eyes smoldering.

“Go and prepare your clans for battle,” said the king, and they lumbered away with the ape-like gait assumed by such stunted giants. Paying no more heed to the priest who was examining the ghastly ruin on the altar, Bran beckoned to Cormac. The Gael followed him with alacrity. Once out of that grim grove, under the starlight, he breathed more freely. They stood on an eminence, looking out over long swelling undulations of gently waving heather. Near at hand a few fires twinkled, their fewness giving scant evidence of the hordes of tribesmen who lay close by. Beyond these were more fires and beyond these still more, which last marked the camp of Cormac’s own men, hard-riding, hard-fighting Gaels, who were of that band which was just beginning to get a foothold on the western coast of Caledonia–the nucleus of what was later to become the kingdom of Dalriadia. To the left of these, other fires gleamed.

And far away to the south were more fires–mere pinpoints of light. But even at that distance the Pictish king and his Celtic ally could see that these fires were laid out in regular order.

“The fires of the legions,” muttered Bran. “The fires that have lit a path around the world. The men who light those fires have trampled the races under their iron heels. And now–we of the heather have our backs at the wall. What will fall on the morrow?”

“Victory for us, says the priest,” answered Cormac.

Bran made an impatient gesture. “Moonlight on the ocean. Wind in the fir tops. Do you think that I put faith in such mummery? Or that I enjoyed the butchery of a captive legionary? I must hearten my people; it was for Gron and Bocah that I let old Gonar read the portents. The warriors will fight better.”

“And Gonar?”

Bran laughed. “Gonar is too old to believe–anything. He was high priest of the Shadows a score of years before I was born. He claims direct descent from that Gonar who was a wizard in the days of Brule, the Spear-slayer who was the first of my line. No man knows how old he is–sometimes I think he is the original Gonar himself!”

“At least,” said a mocking voice, and Cormac started as a dim shape appeared at his side, “at least I have learned that in order to keep the faith and

trust of the people, a wise man must appear to be a fool. I know secrets that would blast even your brain, Bran, should I speak them. But in order that the people may believe in me, I must descend to such things as they think proper magic–and prance and yell and rattle snakeskins, and dabble about in human blood and chicken livers."

Cormac looked at the ancient with new interest. The semi-madness of his appearance had vanished. He was no longer the charlatan, the spell-mumbling shaman. The starlight lent him a dignity which seemed to increase his very height, so that he stood like a white-bearded patriarch.

"Bran, your doubt lies there." The lean arm pointed to the fourth ring of fires.

"Aye," the king nodded gloomily. "Cormac–you know as well as I. Tomorrow's battle hinges upon that circle of fires. With the chariots of the Britons and your own Western horsemen, our success would be certain, but–surely the devil himself is in the heart of every Northman! You know how I trapped that band–how they swore to fight for me against Rome! And now that their chief, Rognar, is dead, they swear that they will be led only by a king of their own race! Else they will break their vow and go over to the Romans. Without them we are doomed, for we can not change our former plan."

"Take heart, Bran," said Gonar. "Touch the jewel in your iron crown. Mayhap it will bring you aid."

Bran laughed bitterly. "Now you talk as the people think. I am no fool to twist with empty words. What of the gem? It is a strange one, truth, and has brought me luck ere now. But I need now, no jewels, but the allegiance of three hundred fickle Northmen who are the only warriors among us who may stand the charge of the legions on foot."

"But the jewel, Bran, the jewel!" persisted Gonar.

"Well, the jewel!" cried Bran impatiently. "It is older than this world. It was old when Atlantis and Lemuria sank into the sea. It was given to Brule, the Spear-slayer, first of my line, by the Atlantean Kull, king of Valusia, in the days when the world was young. But shall that profit us now?"

"Who knows?" asked the wizard obliquely. "Time and space exist not. There was no past, and there shall be no future. NOW is all. All things that ever were, are, or ever will be, transpire *now*. Man is forever at the center of what we call time and space. I have gone into yesterday and tomorrow and both were as real as today–which is like the dreams of ghosts! But let me sleep and talk with Gonar. Mayhap he shall aid us."

"What means he?" asked Cormac, with a slight twitching of his shoulders, as the priest strode away in the shadows.

“He has ever said that the first Gonar comes to him in his dreams and talks with him,” answered Bran. “I have seen him perform deeds that seemed beyond human ken. I know not. I am but an unknown king with an iron crown, trying to lift a race of savages out of the slime into which they have sunk. Let us look to the camps.”

———

As they walked Cormac wondered. By what strange freak of fate had such a man risen among this race of savages, survivors of a darker, grimmer age? Surely he was an atavism, an original type of the days when the Picts ruled all Europe, before their primitive empire fell before the bronze swords of the Gauls. Cormac knew how Bran, rising by his own efforts from the negligent position of the son of a Wolf clan chief, had to an extent united the tribes of the heather and now claimed kingship over all Caledon. But his rule was loose and much remained before the Pictish clans would forget their feuds and present a solid front to foreign foes. On the battle of the morrow, the first pitched battle between the Picts under their king and the Romans, hinged the future of the rising Pictish kingdom.

Bran and his ally walked through the Pictish camp where the swart warriors lay sprawled about their small fires, sleeping or gnawing half-cooked food. Cormac was impressed by their silence. A thousand men camped here, yet the only sounds were occasional low guttural intonations. The silence of the Stone Age rested in the souls of these men.

They were all short–most of them crooked of limb. Giant dwarfs; Bran Mak Morn was a tall man among them. Only the older men were bearded and they scantily, but their black hair fell about their eyes so that they peered fiercely from under the tangle. They were barefoot and clad scantily in wolfskins. Their arms consisted in short barbed swords of iron, heavy black bows, arrows tipped with flint, iron and copper, and stone-headed mallets. Defensive armor they had none, save for a crude shield of hide-covered wood; many had worked bits of metal into their tangled manes as a slight protection against sword-cuts. Some few, sons of long lines of chiefs, were smooth-limbed and lithe like Bran, but in the eyes of all gleamed the unquenchable savagery of the primeval.

These men are fully savages, thought Cormac, worse than the Gauls, Britons and Germans. Can the old legends be true–that they reigned in a day when strange cities rose where now the sea rolls? And that they survived the flood that washed those gleaming empires under, sinking again into that savagery from which they once had risen?

Close to the encampment of the tribesmen were the fires of a group of Britons–members of fierce tribes who lived south of the Roman Wall but who dwelt in the hills and forests to the west and defied the power of Rome. Powerfully built men they were, with blazing blue eyes and shocks of tousled yellow hair, such men as had thronged the Ceanntish beaches when Caesar brought the Eagles into the Isles. These men, like the Picts, wore no armor, and were clad scantily in coarse-worked cloth and deerskin sandals. They bore small round bucklers of hard wood, braced with bronze, to be worn on the left arm, and long heavy bronze swords with blunt points. Some had bows, though the Britons were indifferent archers. Their bows were shorter than the Picts' and effective only at close range. But ranged close by their fires were the weapons that had made the name Briton a word of terror to Pict, Roman and Norse raider alike. Within the circle of firelight stood fifty bronze chariots with long cruel blades curving out from the sides. One of these blades could dismember half a dozen men at once. Tethered close by under the vigilant eyes of their guards grazed the chariot horses–big, rangy steeds, swift and powerful.

"Would that we had more of them!" mused Bran. "With a thousand chariots and my bowmen I could drive the legions into the sea."

"The free British tribes must eventually fall before Rome," said Cormac. "It would seem they would rush to join you in your war."

Bran made a helpless gesture. "The fickleness of the Celt. They can not forget old feuds. Our ancient men have told us how they would not even unite against Caesar when the Romans first came. They will not make head against a common foe together. These men came to me because of some dispute with their chief, but I can not depend on them when they are not actually fighting."

Cormac nodded. "I know; Caesar conquered Gaul by playing one tribe against another. My own people shift and change with the waxing and waning of the tides. But of all Celts, the Cymry are the most changeable, the least stable. Not many centuries ago my own Gaelic ancestors wrested Erin from the Cymric Danaans, because though they outnumbered us, they opposed us as separate tribes, rather than as a nation."

"And so these Cymric Britons face Rome," said Bran. "These will aid us on the morrow. Further I can not say. But how shall I expect loyalty from alien tribes, who am not sure of my own people? Thousands lurk in the hills, holding aloof. I am king in name only. Let me win tomorrow and they will flock to my standard; if I lose, they will scatter like birds before a cold wind."

A chorus of rough welcome greeted the two leaders as they entered the camp of Cormac's Gaels. Five hundred in number they were, tall rangy men, black-haired and gray-eyed mainly, with the bearing of men who lived by war alone. While there was nothing like close discipline among them, there was an air of more system and practical order than existed in the lines of the Picts and Britons. These men were of the last Celtic race to invade the Isles and their barbaric civilization was of much higher order than that of their Cymric kin. The ancestors of the Gaels had learned the arts of war on the vast plains of Scythia and at the courts of the Pharaohs where they had fought as mercenaries of Egypt, and much of what they learned they brought into Ireland with them. Excelling in metal work, they were armed, not with clumsy bronze swords, but with high-grade weapons of iron.

They were clad in well-woven kilts and leathern sandals. Each wore a light shirt of chain mail and a vizorless helmet, but this was all of their defensive armor. Celts, Gaelic or Brythonic, were prone to judge a man's valor by the amount of armor he wore. The Britons who faced Caesar deemed the Romans cowards because they cased themselves in metal, and many centuries later the Irish clans thought the same of the mail-clad Norman knights of Strongbow.

Cormac's warriors were horsemen. They neither knew nor esteemed the use of the bow. They bore the inevitable round, metal-braced buckler, dirks, long straight swords and light single-handed axes. Their tethered horses grazed not far away–big-boned animals, not so ponderous as those raised by the Britons, but swifter.

Bran's eyes lighted as the two strode through the camp. "These men are keen-beaked birds of war! See how they whet their axes and jest of the morrow! Would that the raiders in yon camp were as staunch as your men, Cormac! Then would I greet the legions with a laugh when they come up from the south tomorrow."

They were entering the circle of the Northmen fires. Three hundred men sat about gambling, whetting their weapons and drinking deep of the heather ale furnished them by their Pictish allies. These gazed upon Bran and Cormac with no great friendliness. It was striking to note the difference between them and the Picts and Celts–the difference in their cold eyes, their strong moody faces, their very bearing. Here was ferocity, and savagery, but not of the wild, upbursting fury of the Celt. Here was fierceness backed by grim determination and stolid stubbornness. The charge of the British clans was terrible, overwhelming. But they had no patience; let them be balked of immediate victory and they were likely to lose heart and scatter or fall to

bickering among themselves. There was the patience of the cold blue North in these seafarers–a lasting determination that would keep them steadfast to the bitter end, once their face was set toward a definite goal.

As to personal stature, they were giants; massive yet rangy. That they did not share the ideas of the Celts regarding armor was shown by the fact that they were clad in heavy scale mail shirts that reached below mid-thigh, heavy horned helmets and hardened hide leggings, reinforced, as were their shoes, with plates of iron. Their shields were huge oval affairs of hard wood, hide and brass. As to weapons, they had long iron-headed spears, heavy iron axes, and daggers. Some had long wide-bladed swords.

Cormac scarcely felt at ease with the cold magnetic eyes of these flaxen-haired men fixed upon him. He and they were hereditary foes, even though they did chance to be fighting on the same side at present–but were they?

A man came forward, a tall gaunt warrior on whose scarred, wolfish face the flickering firelight reflected deep shadows. With his wolfskin mantle flung carelessly about his wide shoulders, and the great horns on his helmet adding to his height, he stood there in the swaying shadows, like some half-human thing, a brooding shape of the dark barbarism that was soon to engulf the world.

“Well, Wulfhere,” said the Pictish king, “you have drunk the mead of council and have spoken about the fires–what is your decision?”

The Northman’s eyes flashed in the gloom. “Give us a king of our own race to follow if you wish us to fight for you.”

Bran flung out his hands. “Ask me to drag down the stars to gem your helmets! Will not your comrades follow you?”

“Not against the legions,” answered Wulfhere sullenly. “A king led us on the viking path–a king must lead us against the Romans. And Rognar is dead.”

“I am a king,” said Bran. “Will you fight for me if I stand at the tip of your fight wedge?”

“A king of our own race,” said Wulfhere doggedly. “We are all picked men of the North. We fight for none but a king, and a king must lead us–against the legions.”

Cormac sensed a subtle threat in this repeated phrase.

“Here is a prince of Erin,” said Bran. “Will you fight for the Westerner?”

“We fight under no Celt, West or East,” growled the viking, and a low rumble of approval rose from the onlookers. “It is enough to fight by their side.”

The hot Gaelic blood rose in Cormac’s brain and he pushed past Bran, his hand on his sword. “How mean you that, pirate?”

Before Wulfhere could reply Bran interposed: “Have done! Will you fools throw away the battle before it is fought, by your madness? What of your oath, Wulfhere?”

“We swore it under Rognar; when he died from a Roman arrow we were absolved of it. We will follow only a king–against the legions.”

“But your comrades will follow you–against the heather people!” snapped Bran.

“Aye,” the Northman’s eyes met his brazenly. “Send us a king or we join the Romans tomorrow.”

Bran snarled. In his rage he dominated the scene, dwarfing the huge men who towered over him.

“Traitors! Liars! I hold your lives in my hand! Aye, draw your swords if you will–Cormac, keep your blade in its sheath. These wolves will not bite a king! Wulfhere–I spared your lives when I could have taken them.

“You came to raid the countries of the South, sweeping down from the northern sea in your galleys. You ravaged the coasts and the smoke of burning villages hung like a cloud over the shores of Caledon. I trapped you all when you were pillaging and burning–with the blood of my people on your hands. I burned your long ships and ambushed you when you followed. With thrice your number of bowmen who burned for your lives hidden in the heathered hills about you, I spared you when we could have shot you down like trapped wolves. Because I spared you, you swore to come and fight for me.”

“And shall we die because the Picts fight Rome?” rumbled a bearded raider.

“Your lives are forfeit to me; you came to ravage the South. I did not promise to send you all back to your homes in the North unharmed and loaded with loot. Your vow was to fight one battle against Rome under my standard. Then I will aid your survivors to build ships and you may go where you will, with a goodly share of the plunder we take from the legions. Rognar had kept his oath. But Rognar died in a skirmish with Roman scouts and now you, Wulfhere the Dissension-breeder, you stir up your comrades to dishonor themselves by that which a Northman hates–the breaking of the sworn word.”

“We break no oath,” snarled the viking, and the king sensed the basic Germanic stubbornness, far harder to combat than the fickleness of the fiery Celts. “Give us a king, neither Pict, Gael nor Briton, and we will die for you. If not–then we will fight tomorrow for the greatest of all kings–the emperor of Rome!”

For a moment Cormac thought that the Pictish king, in his black rage, would draw and strike the Northman dead. The concentrated fury that blazed in Bran's dark eyes caused Wulfhere to recoil and drop a hand to his belt.

"Fool!" said Mak Morn in a low voice that vibrated with passion. "I could sweep you from the earth before the Romans are near enough to hear your death howls. Choose–fight for me on the morrow–or die tonight under a black cloud of arrows, a red storm of swords, a dark wave of chariots!"

At the mention of the chariots, the only arm of war that had ever broken the Norse shield-wall, Wulfhere changed expression, but he held his ground.

"War be it," he said doggedly. "Or a king to lead us!"

The Northmen responded with a short deep roar and a clash of swords on shields. Bran, eyes blazing, was about to speak again when a white shape glided silently into the ring of firelight.

"Soft words, soft words," said old Gonar tranquilly. "King, say no more. Wulfhere, you and your fellows will fight for us if you have a king to lead you?"

"We have sworn."

"Then be at ease," quoth the wizard; "for ere battle joins on the morrow I will send you such a king as no man on earth has followed for a hundred thousand years! A king neither Pict, Gael nor Briton, but one to whom the emperor of Rome is as but a village headman!"

While they stood undecided, Gonar took the arms of Cormac and Bran. "Come. And you, Northmen, remember your vow, and my promise which I have never broken. Sleep now, nor think to steal away in the darkness to the Roman camp, for if you escaped our shafts you would not escape either my curse or the suspicions of the legionaries."

So the three walked away and Cormac, looking back, saw Wulfhere standing by the fire, fingering his golden beard, with a look of puzzled anger on his lean evil face.

The three walked silently through the waving heather under the far-away stars while the weird night wind whispered ghostly secrets about them.

"Ages ago," said the wizard suddenly, "in the days when the world was young, great lands rose where now the ocean roars. On these lands thronged mighty nations and kingdoms. Greatest of all these was Valusia–Land of Enchantment. Rome is as a village compared to the splendor of the cities of

Valusia. And the greatest king was Kull, who came from the land of Atlantis to wrest the crown of Valusia from a degenerate dynasty. The Picts who dwelt in the isles which now form the mountain peaks of a strange land upon the Western Ocean, were allies of Valusia, and the greatest of all the Pictish war-chiefs was Brule the Spear-slayer, first of the line men call Mak Morn.

"Kull gave to Brule the jewel which you now wear in your iron crown, oh king, after a strange battle in a dim land, and down the long ages it has come to us, ever a sign of the Mak Morn, a symbol of former greatness. When at last the sea rose and swallowed Valusia, Atlantis and Lemuria, only the Picts survived and they were scattered and few. Yet they began again the slow climb upward, and though many of the arts of civilization were lost in the great flood, yet they progressed. The art of metal-working was lost, so they excelled in the working of flint. And they ruled all the new lands flung up by the sea and now called Europe, until down from the north came younger tribes who had scarce risen from the ape when Valusia reigned in her glory, and who, dwelling in the icy lands about the Pole, knew naught of the lost splendor of the Seven Empires and little of the flood that had swept away half a world.

"And still they have come–Aryans, Celts, Germans, swarming down from the great cradle of their race which lies near the Pole. So again was the growth of the Pictish nation checked and the race hurled into savagery. Erased from the earth, on the fringe of the world with our backs to the wall we fight. Here in Caledon is the last stand of a once mighty race. And we change. Our people have mixed with the savages of an elder age which we drove into the North when we came into the Isles, and now, save for their chieftains, such as thou, Bran, a Pict is strange and abhorrent to look upon."

"True, true," said the king impatiently, "but what has that to do—"

"Kull, king of Valusia," said the wizard imperturbably, "was a barbarian in his age as thou art in thine, though he ruled a mighty empire by the weight of his sword. Gonar, friend of Brule, your first ancestor, has been dead a hundred thousand years as we reckon time. Yet I talked with him a scant hour agone."

"You talked with his ghost—"

"Or he with mine? Did I go back a hundred thousand years, or did he come forward? If he came to me out of the past, it is not I who talked with a dead man, but he who talked with a man unborn. Past, present and future are one to a wise man. I talked to Gonar while he was alive; likewise was I alive. In a timeless, spaceless land we met and he told me many things."

The land was growing light with the birth of dawn. The heather waved and bent in long rows before the dawn wind as bowing in worship of the rising sun.

“The jewel in your crown is a magnet that draws down the eons,” said Gonar. “The sun is rising–and who comes out of the sunrise?”

Cormac and the king started. The sun was just lifting a red orb above the eastern hills. And full in the glow, etched boldly against the golden rim, a man suddenly appeared. They had not seen him come. Against the golden birth of day he loomed colossal; a gigantic god from the dawn of creation. Now as he strode toward them the waking hosts saw him and sent up a sudden shout of wonder.

“Who–or what is it?” exclaimed Bran.

“Let us go to meet him, Bran,” answered the wizard. “He is the king Gonar has sent to save the people of Brule.”

II

“I have reached these lands but newly
From an ultimate dim Thule;
From a wild weird clime that lieth sublime
Out of Space–out of Time.”

–Poe

The army fell silent as Bran, Cormac and Gonar went toward the stranger who approached in long swinging strides. As they neared him the illusion of monstrous size vanished, but they saw he was a man of great stature. At first Cormac thought him to be a Northman but a second glance told him that nowhere before had he seen such a man. He was built much like the vikings, at once massive and lithe–tigerish. But his features were not as theirs, and his square-cut, lion-like mane of hair was as black as Bran’s own. Under heavy brows glittered eyes gray as steel and cold as ice. His bronzed face, strong and inscrutable, was clean-shaven, and the broad forehead betokened a high intelligence, just as the firm jaw and thin lips showed will-power and courage.

But more than all, the bearing of him, the unconscious lion-like stateliness, marked him as a natural king, a ruler of men.

Sandals of curious make were on his feet and he wore a pliant coat of strangely meshed mail which came almost to his knees. A broad belt with a great golden buckle encircled his waist, supporting a long straight sword in a heavy leather scabbard. His hair was confined by a wide, heavy golden band about his head.

Such was the man who paused before the silent group. He seemed slightly puzzled, slightly amused. Recognition flickered in his eyes. He spoke in a strange archaic Pictish which Cormac scarcely understood. His voice was deep and resonant.

“Ha, Brule, Gonar did not tell me I would dream of you!”

For the first time in his life Cormac saw the Pictish king completely thrown off his balance. He gaped, speechless. The stranger continued:

“And wearing the gem I gave you, in a circlet on your head! Last night you wore it in a ring on your finger.”

“Last night?” gasped Bran.

“Last night or a hundred thousand years ago–all one!” murmured Gonar in evident enjoyment of the situation.

“I am not Brule,” said Bran. “Are you mad to thus speak of a man dead a hundred thousand years? He was first of my line.”

The stranger laughed unexpectedly. “Well, now I know I am dreaming! This will be a tale to tell Brule when I waken on the morrow! That I went into the future and saw men claiming descent from the Spear-slayer who is, as yet, not even married. No, you are not Brule, I see now, though you have his eyes and his bearing. But he is taller and broader in the shoulders. Yet you have his jewel–oh, well–anything can happen in a dream, so I will not quarrel with you. For a time I thought I had been transported to some other land in my sleep, and was in reality awake in a strange country, for this is the clearest dream I ever dreamed. Who are you?”

“I am Bran Mak Morn, king of the Caledonian Picts. And this ancient is Gonar, a wizard, of the line of Gonar. And this warrior is Cormac na Connacht, a prince of the isle of Erin.”

The stranger slowly shook his lion-like head. “These words sound strangely to me, save Gonar–and that one is not Gonar, though he too is old. What land is this?”

“Caledon, or Alba, as the Gaels call it.”

“And who are those squat ape-like warriors who watch us yonder, all agape?”

“They are the Picts who own my rule.”

“How strangely distorted folk are in dreams!” muttered the stranger. “And who are those shock-headed men about the chariots?”

“They are Britons–Cymry from south of the Wall.”

“What Wall?”

“The Wall built by Rome to keep the people of the heather out of Britain.”

“Britain?” the tone was curious. “I never heard of that land–and what is Rome?”

“What!” cried Bran. “You never heard of Rome, the empire that rules the world?”

“No empire rules the world,” answered the other haughtily. “The mightiest kingdom on earth is that wherein I reign.”

“And who are you?”

“Kull of Atlantis, king of Valusia!”

Cormac felt a coldness trickle down his spine. The cold gray eyes were unswerving–but this was incredible–monstrous–unnatural.

“Valusia!” cried Bran. “Why, man, the sea waves have rolled above the spires of Valusia for untold centuries!”

Kull laughed outright. “What a mad nightmare this is! When Gonar put on me the spell of deep sleep last night–or this night!–in the secret room of the inner palace, he told me I would dream strange things, but this is more fantastic than I reckoned. And the strangest thing is, I know I am dreaming!”

Gonar interposed as Bran would have spoken. “Question not the acts of the gods,” muttered the wizard. “You are king because in the past you have seen and seized opportunities. The gods or the first Gonar have sent you this man. Let me deal with him.”

Bran nodded, and while the silent army gaped in speechless wonder, just within ear-shot, Gonar spoke: “Oh great king, you dream, but is not all life a dream? How reckon you but that your former life is but a dream from which you have just awakened? Now we dream-folk have our wars and our peace, and just now a great host comes up from the south to destroy the people of Brule. Will you aid us?”

Kull grinned with pure zest. “Aye! I have fought battles in dreams ere now, have slain and been slain and was amazed when I woke from my visions. And at times, as now, dreaming I have known I dreamed. See, I pinch myself and feel it, but I know I dream for I have felt the pain of fierce wounds, in dreams. Yes, people of my dream, I will fight for you against the other dream-folk. Where are they?”

“And that you enjoy the dream more,” said the wizard subtly, “forget that it is a dream and pretend that by the magic of the first Gonar, and the quality of the jewel you gave Brule, that now gleams on the crown of the Morni, you

have in truth been transported forward into another, wilder age where the people of Brule fight for their life against a stronger foe."

For a moment the man who called himself king of Valusia seemed startled; a strange look of doubt, almost of fear, clouded his eyes. Then he laughed.

"Good! Lead on, wizard."

But now Bran took charge. He had recovered himself and was at ease. Whether he thought, like Cormac, that this was all a gigantic hoax arranged by Gonar, he showed no sign.

"King Kull, see you those men yonder who lean on their long-shafted axes as they gaze upon you?"

"The tall men with the golden hair and beards?"

"Aye–our success in the coming battle hinges on them. They swear to go over to the enemy if we give them not a king to lead them–their own having been slain. Will you lead them to battle?"

Kull's eyes glowed with appreciation. "They are men such as my own Red Slayers, my picked regiment. I will lead them."

"Come then."

The small group made their way down the slope, through throngs of warriors who pushed forward eagerly to get a better view of the stranger, then pressed back as he approached. An undercurrent of tense whispering ran through the horde.

The Northmen stood apart in a compact group. Their cold eyes took in Kull and he gave back their stares, taking in every detail of their appearance.

"Wulfhere," said Bran, "we have brought you a king. I hold you to your oath."

"Let him speak to us," said the viking harshly.

"He can not speak your tongue," answered Bran, knowing that the Northmen knew nothing of the legends of his race. "He is a great king of the South—"

"He comes out of the past," broke in the wizard calmly. "He was the greatest of all kings, long ago."

"A dead man!" The vikings moved uneasily and the rest of the horde pressed forward, drinking in every word. But Wulfhere scowled: "Shall a ghost lead living men? You bring us a man you say is dead. We will not follow a corpse."

"Wulfhere," said Bran in still passion, "you are a liar and a traitor. You set

us this task, thinking it impossible. You yearn to fight under the Eagles of Rome. We have brought you a king neither Pict, Gael nor Briton and you deny your vow!"

"Let him fight me, then!" howled Wulfhere in uncontrollable wrath, swinging his ax about his head in a glittering arc. "If your dead man overcomes me–then my people will follow you. If I overcome him, you shall let us depart in peace to the camp of the legions!"

"Good!" said the wizard. "Do you agree, wolves of the North?"

A fierce yell and a brandishing of swords was the answer. Bran turned to Kull, who had stood silent, understanding nothing of what was said. But the Atlantean's eyes gleamed. Cormac felt that those cold eyes had looked on too many such scenes not to understand something of what had passed.

"This warrior says you must fight him for the leadership," said Bran, and Kull, eyes glittering with growing battle-joy, nodded: "I guessed as much. Give us space."

"A shield and a helmet!" shouted Bran, but Kull shook his head.

"I need none," he growled. "Back and give us room to swing our steel!"

———

Men pressed back on each side, forming a solid ring about the two men, who now approached each other warily. Kull had drawn his sword and the great blade shimmered like a live thing in his hand. Wulfhere, scarred by a hundred savage fights, flung aside his wolfskin mantle and came in cautiously, fierce eyes peering over the top of his out-thrust shield, ax half lifted in his right hand.

Suddenly when the warriors were still many feet apart Kull sprang. His attack brought a gasp from men used to deeds of prowess; for like a leaping tiger he shot through the air and his sword crashed on the quickly lifted shield. Sparks flew and Wulfhere's ax hacked in, but Kull was under its sweep and as it swished viciously above his head he thrust upward and sprang out again, cat-like. His motions had been too quick for the eye to follow. The upper edge of Wulfhere's shield showed a deep cut, and there was a long rent in his mail shirt where Kull's sword had barely missed the flesh beneath.

Cormac, trembling with the terrible thrill of the fight, wondered at this sword that could thus slice through scale-mail. And the blow that gashed the shield should have shattered the blade. Yet not a notch showed in the Valusian steel! Surely this blade was forged by another people in another age!

Now the two giants leaped again to the attack and like double strokes of lightning their weapons crashed. Wulfhere's shield fell from his arm in two

pieces as the Atlantean’s sword sheared clear through it, and Kull staggered as the Northman’s ax, driven with all the force of his great body, descended on the golden circlet about his head. That blow should have sheared through the gold like butter to split the skull beneath, but the ax rebounded, showing a great notch in the edge. The next instant the Northman was overwhelmed by a whirlwind of steel–a storm of strokes delivered with such swiftness and power that he was borne back as on the crest of a wave, unable to launch an attack of his own. With all his tried skill he sought to parry the singing steel with his ax. But he could only avert his doom for a few seconds; could only for an instant turn the whistling blade that hewed off bits of his mail, so close fell the blows. One of the horns flew from his helmet; then the ax-head itself fell away, and the same blow that severed the handle, bit through the viking’s helmet into the scalp beneath. Wulfhere was dashed to his knees, a trickle of blood starting down his face.

Kull checked his second stroke, and tossing his sword to Cormac, faced the dazed Northman weaponless. The Atlantean’s eyes were blazing with ferocious joy and he roared something in a strange tongue. Wulfhere gathered his legs under him and bounded up, snarling like a wolf, a dagger flashing into his hand. The watching horde gave tongue in a yell that ripped the skies as the two bodies clashed. Kull’s clutching hand missed the Northman’s wrist but the desperately lunging dagger snapped on the Atlantean’s mail, and dropping the useless hilt, Wulfhere locked his arms about his foe in a bear-like grip that would have crushed the ribs of a lesser man. Kull grinned tigerishly and returned the grapple, and for a moment the two swayed on their feet. Slowly the black-haired warrior bent his foe backward until it seemed his spine would snap. With a howl that had nothing of the human in it, Wulfhere clawed frantically at Kull’s face, trying to tear out his eyes, then turned his head and snapped his fang-like teeth into the Atlantean’s arm. A yell went up as a trickle of blood started: “He bleeds! He bleeds! He is no ghost, after all, but a mortal man!”

Angered, Kull shifted his grip, shoving the frothing Wulfhere away from him, and smote him terrifically under the ear with his right hand. The viking landed on his back a dozen feet away. Then, howling like a wild man, he leaped up with a stone in his hand and flung it. Only Kull’s incredible quickness saved his face; as it was, the rough edge of the missile tore his cheek and inflamed him to madness. With a lion-like roar he bounded upon his foe, enveloped him in an irresistible blast of sheer fury, whirled him high above his head as if he were a child and cast him a dozen feet away. Wulfhere pitched on his head and lay still–broken and dead.

Dazed silence reigned for an instant; then from the Gaels went up a

thundering roar, and the Britons and Picts took it up, howling like wolves, until the echoes of the shouts and the clangor of sword on shield reached the ears of the marching legionaries, miles to the south.

"Men of the gray North," shouted Bran, "will you hold by your oath *now*?"

The fierce souls of the Northmen were in their eyes as their spokesman answered. Primitive, superstitious, steeped in tribal lore of fighting gods and mythical heroes, they did not doubt that the black-haired fighting man was some supernatural being sent by the fierce gods of battle.

"Aye! Such a man as this we have never seen! Dead man, ghost or devil, we will follow him, whether the trail lead to Rome or Valhalla!"

Kull understood the meaning, if not the words. Taking his sword from Cormac with a word of thanks, he turned to the waiting Northmen and silently held the blade toward them high above his head, in both hands, before he returned it to its scabbard. Without understanding, they appreciated the action. Bloodstained and disheveled, he was an impressive picture of stately, magnificent barbarism.

"Come," said Bran, touching the Atlantean's arm; "a host is marching on us and we have much to do. There is scant time to arrange our forces before they will be upon us. Come to the top of yonder slope."

There the Pict pointed. They were looking down into a valley which ran north and south, widening from a narrow gorge in the north until it debouched upon a plain to the south. The whole valley was less than a mile in length.

"Up this valley will our foes come," said the Pict, "because they have wagons loaded with supplies and on all sides of this vale the ground is too rough for such travel. Here we plan an ambush."

"I would have thought you would have had your men lying in wait long before now," said Kull. "What of the scouts the enemy is sure to send out?"

"The savages I lead would never have waited in ambush so long," said Bran with a touch of bitterness. "I could not post them until I was sure of the Northmen. Even so I had not dared to post them ere now–even yet they may take panic from the drifting of a cloud or the blowing of a leaf, and scatter like birds before a cold wind. King Kull–the fate of the Pictish nation is at stake. I am called king of the Picts, but my rule as yet is but a hollow mockery. The hills are full of wild clans who refuse to fight for me. Of the thousand bowmen now at my command, more than half are of my own clan.

"Some eighteen hundred Romans are marching against us. It is not a real invasion, but much hinges upon it. It is the beginning of an attempt to extend their boundaries. They plan to build a fortress a day's march to the north of this valley. If they do, they will build other forts, drawing bands of steel about

the heart of the free people. If I win this battle and wipe out this army, I will win a double victory. Then the tribes will flock to me and the next invasion will meet a solid wall of resistance. If I lose, the clans will scatter, fleeing into the north until they can no longer flee, fighting as separate clans rather than as one strong nation.

"I have a thousand archers, five hundred horsemen, fifty chariots with their drivers and swordsmen–one hundred fifty men in all–and, thanks to you, three hundred heavily armed Northern pirates. How would you arrange your battle lines?"

"Well," said Kull, "I would have barricaded the north end of the valley–no! That would suggest a trap. But I would block it with a band of desperate men, like those you have given me to lead. Three hundred could hold the gorge for a time against any number. Then, when the enemy was engaged with these men to the narrow part of the valley, I would have my archers shoot down into them until their ranks are broken, from both sides of the vale. Then, having my horsemen concealed behind one ridge and my chariots behind the other, I would charge with both simultaneously and sweep the foe into a red ruin."

Bran's eyes glowed. "Exactly, king of Valusia. Such was my exact plan–"

"But what of the scouts?"

"My warriors are like panthers; they hide under the noses of the Romans. Those who ride into the valley will see only what we wish them to see. Those who ride over the ridge will not come back to report. An arrow is swift and silent.

"You see that the pivot of the whole thing depends on the men that hold the gorge. They must be men who can fight on foot and resist the charges of the heavy legionaries long enough for the trap to close. Outside these Northmen I had no such force of men. My naked warriors with their short swords could never stand such a charge for an instant. Nor is the armor of the Celts made for such work; moreover, they are not foot-fighters, and I need them elsewhere.

"So you see why I had such desperate need of the Northmen. Now will you stand in the gorge with them and hold back the Romans until I can spring the trap? Remember, most of you will die."

Kull smiled. "I have taken chances all my life, though Tu, chief councillor, would say my life belongs to Valusia and I have no right to so risk it—" His voice trailed off and a strange look flitted across his face. "By Valka," said he, laughing uncertainly, "sometimes I forget this is a dream! All seems so real. But it is–of course it is! Well, then, if I die I will but awaken as I have done in times past. Lead on, king of Caledon!"

Cormac, going to his warriors, wondered. Surely it was all a hoax; yet–he heard the arguments of the warriors all about him as they armed themselves and prepared to take their posts. The black-haired king was Neid himself, the Celtic war-god; he was an antediluvian king brought out of the past by Gonar; he was a mythical fighting man out of Valhalla. He was no man at all but a ghost! No, he was mortal, for he had bled. But the gods themselves bled, though they did not die. So the controversies raged. At least, thought Cormac, if it was all a hoax to inspire the warriors with the feeling of supernatural aid, it had succeeded. The belief that Kull was more than a mortal man had fired Celt, Pict and viking alike into a sort of inspired madness. And Cormac asked himself–what did he himself believe? This man was surely one from some far land–yet in his every look and action there was a vague hint of a greater difference than mere distance of space–a hint of alien Time, of misty abysses and gigantic gulfs of eons lying between the black-haired stranger and the men with whom he walked and talked. Clouds of bewilderment mazed Cormac's brain and he laughed in whimsical self-mockery.

III

"And the two wild peoples of the north
Stood fronting in the gloam,
And heard and knew each in his mind
A third great sound upon the wind,
The living walls that hedge mankind,
The walking walls of Rome."

–Chesterton

The sun slanted westward. Silence lay like an invisible mist over the valley. Cormac gathered the reins in his hand and glanced up at the ridges on both sides. The waving heather which grew rank on those steep slopes gave no evidence of the hundreds of savage warriors who lurked there. Here in the narrow gorge which widened gradually southward was the only sign of life. Between the steep walls three hundred Northmen were massed solidly in their

wedge-shaped shield-wall, blocking the pass. At the tip, like the point of a spear, stood the man who called himself Kull, king of Valusia. He wore no helmet, only the great, strangely worked head-band of hard gold, but he bore on his left arm the great shield borne by the dead Rognar; and in his right hand he held the heavy iron mace wielded by the sea-king. The vikings eyed him in wonder and savage admiration. They could not understand his language, or he theirs. But no further orders were necessary. At Bran's directions they had bunched themselves in the gorge, and their only order was–hold the pass!

Bran Mak Morn stood just in front of Kull. So they faced each other, he whose kingdom was yet unborn, and he whose kingdom had been lost in the mists of Time for unguessed ages. Kings of darkness, thought Cormac, nameless kings of the night, whose realms are gulfs and shadows.

The hand of the Pictish king went out. "King Kull, you are more than king–you are a man. Both of us may fall within the next hour–but if we both live, ask what you will of me."

Kull smiled, returning the firm grip. "You too are a man after my own heart, king of the shadows. Surely you are more than a figment of my sleeping imagination. Mayhap we will meet in waking life some day."

Bran shook his head in puzzlement, swung into the saddle and rode away, climbing the eastern slope and vanishing over the ridge. Cormac hesitated: "Strange man, are you in truth of flesh and blood, or are you a ghost?"

"When we dream, we are all flesh and blood–so long as we are dreaming," Kull answered. "This is the strangest nightmare I have ever known–but you, who will soon fade into sheer nothingness as I awaken, seem as real to me *now*, as Brule, or Kananu, or Tu, or Kelkor."

Cormac shook his head as Bran had done, and with a last salute, which Kull returned with barbaric stateliness, he turned and trotted away. At the top of the western ridge he paused. Away to the south a light cloud of dust rose and the head of the marching column was in sight. Already he believed he could feel the earth vibrate slightly to the measured tread of a thousand mailed feet beating in perfect unison. He dismounted, and one of his chieftains, Domnail, took his steed and led it down the slope away from the valley, where trees grew thickly. Only an occasional vague movement among them gave evidence of the five hundred men who stood there, each at his horse's head with a ready hand to check a chance nicker.

Oh, thought Cormac, the gods themselves made this valley for Bran's ambush! The floor of the valley was treeless and the inner slopes were bare save for the waist-high heather. But at the foot of each ridge on the side facing away from the vale, where the soil long washed from the rocky slopes had

accumulated, there grew enough trees to hide five hundred horsemen or fifty chariots.

At the northern end of the valley stood Kull and his three hundred vikings, in open view, flanked on each side by fifty Pictish bowmen. Hidden on the western side of the western ridge were the Gaels. Along the top of the slopes, concealed in the tall heather, lay a hundred Picts with their shafts on string. The rest of the Picts were hidden on the eastern slopes beyond which lay the Britons with their chariots in full readiness. Neither they nor the Gaels to the west could see what went on in the vale, but signals had been arranged.

Now the long column was entering the wide mouth of the valley and their scouts, light-armed men on swift horses, were spreading out between the slopes. They galloped almost within bowshot of the silent host that blocked the pass, then halted. Some whirled and raced back to the main force, while the others deployed and cantered up the slopes, seeking to see what lay beyond. This was the crucial moment. If they got any hint of the ambush, all was lost. Cormac, shrinking down into the heather, marveled at the ability of the Picts to efface themselves from view so completely. He saw a horseman pass within three feet of where he knew a bowman lay, yet the Roman saw nothing.

The scouts topped the ridges, gazed about; then most of them turned and trotted back down the slopes. Cormac wondered at their desultory manner of scouting. He had never fought Romans before, knew nothing of their arrogant self-confidence, of their incredible shrewdness in some ways, their incredible stupidity in others. These men were over-confident; a feeling radiating from their officers. It had been years since a force of Caledonians had stood before the legions. And most of these men were but newly come to Britain; part of a legion which had been quartered in Egypt. They despised their foes and suspected nothing.

But stay–three riders on the opposite ridge had turned and vanished on the other side. And now one, sitting his steed at the crest of the western ridge, not a hundred yards from where Cormac lay, looked long and narrowly down into the mass of trees at the foot of the slope. Cormac saw suspicion grow on his brown, hawk-like face. He half turned as though to call to his comrades, then instead reined his steed down the slope, leaning forward in his saddle. Cormac’s heart pounded. Each moment he expected to see the man wheel and gallop back to raise the alarm. He resisted a mad impulse to leap up and charge the Roman on foot. Surely the man could feel the tenseness in the air–the hundreds of fierce eyes upon him. Now he was half-way down the slope, out of sight of the men in the valley. And now the twang of an unseen bow broke the painful stillness. With a strangled gasp the Roman flung his hands

high, and as the steed reared, he pitched headlong, transfixed by a long black arrow that had flashed from the heather. A stocky dwarf sprang out of nowhere, seemingly, and seized the bridle, quieting the snorting horse, and leading it down the slope. At the fall of the Roman, short crooked men rose like a sudden flight of birds from the grass and Cormac saw the flash of a knife. Then with unreal suddenness all had subsided. Slayers and slain were unseen and only the still waving heather marked the grim deed.

The Gael looked back into the valley. The three who had ridden over the eastern ridge had not come back and Cormac knew they never would. Evidently the other scouts had borne word that only a small band of warriors were ready to dispute the passage of the legionaries. Now the head of the column was almost below him and he thrilled at the sight of these men who were doomed, swinging along with their superb arrogance. And the sight of their splendid armor, their hawk-like faces and perfect discipline awed him as much as it is possible for a Gael to be awed.

Twelve hundred men in heavy armor who marched as one so that the ground shook to their tread! Most of them were of middle height, with powerful chests and shoulders and bronzed faces–hard-bitten veterans of a hundred campaigns. Cormac noted their javelins, short keen swords and heavy shields; their gleaming armor and crested helmets, the eagles on the standards. These were the men beneath whose tread the world had shaken and empires crumbled! Not all were Latins; there were Romanized Britons among them and one century or hundred was composed of huge yellow-haired men–Gauls and Germans, who fought for Rome as fiercely as did the native-born, and hated their wilder kinsmen more savagely.

On each side was a swarm of cavalry, outriders, and the column was flanked by archers and slingers. A number of lumbering wagons carried the supplies of the army. Cormac saw the commander riding in his place–a tall man with a lean, imperious face, evident even at that distance. Marcus Sulius–the Gael knew him by repute.

A deep-throated roar rose from the legionaries as they approached their foes. Evidently they intended to slice their way through and continue without a pause, for the column moved implacably on. Whom the gods destroy they first make mad–Cormac had never heard the phrase but it came to him that the great Sulius was a fool. Roman arrogance! Marcus was used to lashing the cringing peoples of a decadent East; little he guessed of the iron in these

western races.

A group of cavalry detached itself and raced into the mouth of the gorge, but it was only a gesture. With loud jeering shouts they wheeled three spears length away and cast their javelins, which rattled harmlessly on the overlapping shields of the silent Northmen. But their leader dared too much; swinging in, he leaned from his saddle and thrust at Kull's face. The great shield turned the lance and Kull struck back as a snake strikes; the ponderous mace crushed helmet and head like an eggshell, and the very steed went to its knees from the shock of that terrible blow. From the Northmen went up a short fierce roar, and the Picts beside them howled exultantly and loosed their arrows among the retreating horsemen. First blood for the people of the heather! The oncoming Romans shouted vengefully and quickened their pace as the frightened horse raced by, a ghastly travesty of a man, foot caught in the stirrup, trailing beneath the pounding hoofs.

Now the first line of the legionaries, compressed because of the narrowness of the gorge, crashed against the solid wall of shields–crashed and recoiled upon itself. The shield-wall had not shaken an inch. This was the first time the Roman legions had met with that unbreakable formation–that oldest of all Aryan battle-lines–the ancestor of the Spartan regiment–the Theban phalanx–the Macedonian formation–the English square.

Shield crashed on shield and the short Roman sword sought for an opening in that iron wall. Viking spears bristling in solid ranks above, thrust and reddened; heavy axes chopped down, shearing through iron, flesh and bone. Cormac saw Kull, looming above the stocky Romans in the forefront of the fray, dealing blows like thunderbolts. A burly centurion rushed in, shield held high, stabbing upward. The iron mace crashed terribly, shivering the sword, rending the shield apart, shattering the helmet, crushing the skull down between the shoulders–in a single blow.

The front line of the Romans bent like a steel bar about the wedge, as the legionaries sought to struggle through the gorge on each side and surround their opposers. But the pass was too narrow; crouching close against the steep walls the Picts drove their black arrows in a hail of death. At this range the heavy shafts tore through shield and corselet, transfixing the armored men. The front line of battle rolled back, red and broken, and the Northmen trod their few dead under foot to close the gaps their fall had made. Stretched the full width of their front lay a thin line of shattered forms–the red spray of the tide which had broken upon them in vain.

Cormac had leaped to his feet, waving his arms. Domnail and his men broke cover at the signal and came galloping up the slope, lining the ridge. Cormac mounted the horse brought him and glanced impatiently across the

narrow vale. No sign of life appeared on the eastern ridge. Where was Bran–and the Britons?

Down in the valley, the legions, angered at the unexpected opposition of the paltry force in front of them, but not suspicious, were forming in more compact body. The wagons which had halted were lumbering on again and the whole column was once more in motion as if it intended to crash through by sheer weight. With the Gaulish century in the forefront, the legionaries were advancing again in the attack. This time, with the full force of twelve hundred men behind, the charge would batter down the resistance of Kull's warriors like a heavy ram; would stamp them down, sweep over their red ruins. Cormac's men trembled in impatience. Suddenly Marcus Sulius turned and gazed westward, where the line of horsemen was etched against the sky. Even at that distance Cormac saw his face pale. The Roman at last realized the metal of the men he faced, and that he had walked into a trap. Surely in that moment there flashed a chaotic picture through his brain–defeat–disgrace–red ruin!

It was too late to retreat–too late to form into a defensive square with the wagons for barricade. There was but one possible way out, and Marcus, crafty general in spite of his recent blunder, took it. Cormac heard his voice cut like a clarion through the din, and though he did not understand the words, he knew that the Roman was shouting for his men to smite that knot of Northmen like a blast–to hack their way through and out of the trap before it could close!

Now the legionaries, aware of their desperate plight, flung themselves headlong and terribly on their foes. The shield-wall rocked, but it gave not an inch. The wild faces of the Gauls and the hard brown Italian faces glared over locked shields into the blazing eyes of the North. Shields touching, they smote and slew and died in a red storm of slaughter, where crimsoned axes rose and fell and dripping spears broke on notched swords.

Where in God's name was Bran with his chariots? A few minutes more would spell the doom of every man who held that pass. Already they were falling fast, though they locked their ranks closer and held like iron. Those wild men of the North were dying in their tracks; and looming among their golden heads the black lion-mane of Kull shone like a symbol of slaughter, and his reddened mace showered a ghastly rain as it splashed brains and blood like water.

Something snapped in Cormac's brain.

"These men will die while we wait for Bran's signal!" he shouted. "On! Follow me into Hell, sons of Gael!"

A wild roar answered him, and loosing rein he shot down the slope with

five hundred yelling riders plunging headlong after him. And even at that moment a storm of arrows swept the valley from either side like a dark cloud and the terrible clamor of the Picts split the skies. And over the eastern ridge, like a sudden burst of rolling thunder on Judgment Day, rushed the war-chariots. Headlong down the slope they roared, foam flying from the horses' distended nostrils, frantic feet scarcely seeming to touch the ground, making naught of the tall heather. In the foremost chariot, with his dark eyes blazing, crouched Bran Mak Morn, and in all of them the naked Britons were screaming and lashing as if possessed by demons. Behind the flying chariots came the Picts, howling like wolves and loosing their arrows as they ran. The heather belched them forth from all sides in a dark wave.

So much Cormac saw in chaotic glimpses during that wild ride down the slopes. A wave of cavalry swept between him and the main line of the column. Three long leaps ahead of his men, the Gaelic prince met the spears of the Roman riders. The first lance turned on his buckler, and rising in his stirrups he smote downward, cleaving his man from shoulder to breastbone. The next Roman flung a javelin that killed Domnail, but at that instant Cormac's steed crashed into his, breast to breast, and the lighter horse rolled headlong under the shock, flinging his rider beneath the pounding hoofs.

Then the whole blast of the Gaelic charge smote the Roman cavalry, shattering it, crashing and rolling it down and under. Over its red ruins Cormac's yelling demons struck the heavy Roman infantry, and the whole line reeled at the shock. Swords and axes flashed up and down and the force of their rush carried them deep into the massed ranks. Here, checked, they swayed and strove. Javelins thrust, swords flashed upward, bringing down horse and rider, and greatly outnumbered, leaguered on every side, the Gaels had perished among their foes, but at that instant, from the other side the crashing chariots smote the Roman ranks. In one long line they struck almost simultaneously, and at the moment of impact the charioteers wheeled their horses side-long and raced parallel down the ranks, shearing men down like the mowing of wheat. Hundreds died on those curving blades in that moment, and leaping from the chariots, screaming like blood-mad wildcats, the British swordsmen flung themselves upon the spears of the legionaries, hacking madly with their two-handed swords. Crouching, the Picts drove their arrows pointblank and then sprang in to slash and thrust. Maddened with the sight of victory, these wild peoples were like wounded tigers, feeling no wounds, and dying on their feet with their last gasp a snarl of fury.

But the battle was not over yet. Dazed, shattered, their formation broken and nearly half their number down already, the Romans fought back with desperate fury. Hemmed in on all sides they slashed and smote singly, or in

small clumps, fought back to back, archers, slingers, horsemen and heavy legionaries mingled into a chaotic mass. The confusion was complete, but not the victory. Those bottled in the gorge still hurled themselves upon the red axes that barred their way, while the massed and serried battle thundered behind them. From one side Cormac's Gaels raged and slashed; from the other chariots swept back and forth, retiring and returning like iron whirlwinds. There was no retreat, for the Picts had flung a cordon across the way they had come, and having cut the throats of the camp followers and possessed themselves of the wagon, they sent their shafts in a storm of death into the rear of the shattered column. Those long black arrows pierced armor and bone, nailing men together. Yet the slaughter was not all on one side. Picts died beneath the lightning thrust of javelin and shortsword, Gaels pinned beneath their falling horses were hewed to pieces, and chariots, cut loose from their horses, were deluged with the blood of the charioteers.

And at the narrow head of the valley still the battle surged and eddied. Great gods–thought Cormac, glancing between lightning-like blows–do these men still hold the gorge? Aye! They held it! A tenth of their original number, dying on their feet, they still held back the frantic charges of the dwindling legionaries.

Over all the field went up the roar and the clash of arms, and birds of prey, swift-flying out of the sunset, circled above. Cormac, striving to reach Marcus Sulius through the press, saw the Roman's horse sink under him, and the rider rise alone in a waste of foes. He saw the Roman sword flash thrice, dealing a death at each blow; then from the thickest of the fray bounded a terrible figure. It was Bran Mak Morn, stained from head to foot. He cast away his broken sword as he ran, drawing a dirk. The Roman struck, but the Pictish king was under the thrust, and gripping the sword-wrist, he drove the dirk again and again through the gleaming armor.

A mighty roar went up as Marcus died, and Cormac, with a shout, rallied the remnants of his force about him and, striking in the spurs, burst through the shattered lines and rode full speed for the other end of the valley.

But as he approached he saw that he was too late. As they had lived, so had they died, those fierce sea-wolves, with their faces to the foe and their broken weapons red in their hands. In a grim and silent band they lay, even in death preserving some of the shield-wall formation. Among them, in front of them and all about them lay high-heaped the bodies of those who had sought to break them, in vain. *They had not given back a foot!* To the last man, they

had died in their tracks. Nor were there any left to stride over their torn shapes; those Romans who had escaped the viking axes had been struck down by the shafts of the Picts and swords of the Gaels from behind.

Yet this part of the battle was not over. High up on the steep western slope Cormac saw the ending of that drama. A group of Gauls in the armor of Rome pressed upon a single man–a black-haired giant on whose head gleamed a golden crown. There was iron in these men, as well as in the man who had held them to their fate. They were doomed–their comrades were being slaughtered behind them–but before their turn came they would at least have the life of the black-haired chief who had led the golden-haired men of the North.

Pressing upon him from three sides they had forced him slowly back up the steep gorge wall, and the crumpled bodies that stretched along his retreat showed how fiercely every foot of the way had been contested. Here on this steep it was task enough to keep one's footing alone; yet these men at once climbed and fought. Kull's shield and the huge mace were gone, and the great sword in his right hand was dyed crimson. His mail, wrought with a forgotten art, now hung in shreds, and blood streamed from a hundred wounds on limbs, head and body. But his eyes still blazed with the battle-joy and his wearied arm still drove the mighty blade in strokes of death.

But Cormac saw that the end would come before they could reach him. Now at the very crest of the steep, a hedge of points menaced the strange king's life, and even his iron strength was ebbing. Now he split the skull of a huge warrior and the back-stroke shore through the neck-cords of another; reeling under a very rain of swords he struck again and his victim dropped at his feet, cleft to the breast-bone. Then, even as a dozen swords rose above the staggering Atlantean for the death stroke, a strange thing happened. The sun was sinking into the western sea; all the heather swam red like an ocean of blood. Etched in the dying sun, as he had first appeared, Kull stood, and then, like a mist lifting, a mighty vista opened behind the reeling king. Cormac's astounded eyes caught a fleeting gigantic glimpse of other climes and spheres–as if mirrored in summer clouds he saw, instead of the heather hills stretching away to the sea, a dim and mighty land of blue mountains and gleaming quiet lakes–the golden, purple and sapphirean spires and towering walls of a mighty city such as the earth has not known for many a drifting age.

Then like the fading of a mirage it was gone, but the Gauls on the high slope had dropped their weapons and stared like men dazed–*For the man called Kull had vanished and there was no trace of his going!*

As in a daze Cormac turned his steed and rode back across the trampled field. His horse's hoofs splashed in lakes of blood and clanged against the helmets of dead men. Across the valley the shout of victory was thundering. Yet all seemed shadowy and strange. A shape was striding across the torn corpses and Cormac was dully aware that it was Bran. The Gael swung from his horse and fronted the king. Bran was weaponless and gory; blood trickled from gashes on brow, breast and limb; what armor he had worn was clean hacked away and a cut had shorn half-way through his iron crown. But the red jewel still gleamed unblemished like a star of slaughter.

"It is in my mind to slay you," said the Gael heavily and like a man speaking in a daze, "for the blood of brave men is on your head. Had you given the signal to charge sooner, some would have lived."

Bran folded his arms; his eyes were haunted. "Strike if you will; I am sick of slaughter. It is a cold mead, this kinging it. A king must gamble with men's lives and naked swords. The lives of all my people were at stake; I sacrificed the Northmen–yes; and my heart is sore within me, for they were men! But had I given the order when you would have desired, all might have gone awry. The Romans were not yet massed in the narrow mouth of the gorge, and might have had time and space to form their ranks again and beat us off. I waited until the last moment–and the rovers died. A king belongs to his people, and can not let either his own feelings or the lives of men influence him. Now my people are saved; but my heart is cold in my breast."

Cormac wearily dropped his sword-point to the ground.

"You are a born king of men, Bran," said the Gaelic prince.

Bran's eyes roved the field. A mist of blood hovered over all, where the victorious barbarians were looting the dead, while those Romans who had escaped slaughter by throwing down their swords and now stood under guard looked on with hot smoldering eyes.

"My kingdom–my people–are saved," said Bran wearily. "They will come from the heather by the thousands and when Rome moves against us again, she will meet a solid nation. But I am weary. What of Kull?"

"My eyes and brain were mazed with battle," answered Cormac. "I thought to see him vanish like a ghost into the sunset. I will seek his body."

"Seek not for him," said Bran. "Out of the sunrise he came–into the sunset he has gone. Out of the mists of the ages he came to us, and back into the mists of the eons has he returned–to his own kingdom."

Cormac turned away; night was gathering. Gonar stood like a white

specter before him.

“To his own kingdom,” echoed the wizard. “Time and Space are naught. Kull has returned to his own kingdom–his own crown–his own age.”

“Then he was a ghost?”

“Did you not feel the grip of his solid hand? Did you not hear his voice–see him eat and drink, laugh and slay and bleed?”

Still Cormac stood like one in a trance.

“Then if it be possible for a man to pass from one age into one yet unborn, or come forth from a century dead and forgotten, whichever you will, with his flesh-and-blood body and his arms–then he is as mortal as he was in his own day. Is Kull dead, then?”

“He died a hundred thousand years ago, as men reckon time,” answered the wizard, “but in his own age. He died not from the swords of the Gauls of this age. Have we not heard in legends how the king of Valusia traveled into a strange, timeless land of the misty future ages, and there fought in a great battle? Why, so he did! A hundred thousand years ago, or today!

“And a hundred thousand years ago–or a moment agone!–Kull, king of Valusia, roused himself on the silken couch in his secret chamber and laughing, spoke to the first Gonar, saying: ‘Ha, wizard, I have in truth dreamed strangely, for I went into a far clime and a far time in my visions, and fought for the king of a strange shadow-people!’ And the great sorcerer smiled and pointed silently at the red, notched sword, and the torn mail and the many wounds that the king carried. And Kull, fully woken from his ‘vision’ and feeling the sting and the weakness of these yet bleeding wounds, fell silent and mazed, and all life and time and space seemed like a dream of ghosts to him, and he wondered thereat all the rest of his life. For the wisdom of the Eternities is denied even unto princes and Kull could no more understand what Gonar told him than you can understand my words.”

“And then Kull lived despite his many wounds,” said Cormac, “and has returned to the mists of silence and the centuries. Well–he thought us a dream; we thought him a ghost. And sure, life is but a web spun of ghosts and dreams and illusion, and it is in my mind that the kingdom which has this day been born of swords and slaughter in this howling valley is a thing no more solid than the foam of the bright sea.”

Miscellanea

The "Am-ra of the Ta-an" Fragments

The two poems and three texts that follow were found among Howard's papers in 1966 and represent the entirety of the surviving "Am-ra of the Taan" material, predating the first Kull story by several years. The importance and influence of these texts on the Kull stories is delineated in the essay "Atlantean Genesis" found in this volume page 287.

Summer Morn

Am-ra stood on a mountain height
At the break of a summer morn;
He watched in wonder the starlight fall
And the eastern scarlet flare and pale
As the flame of day was born.

Am-ra the Ta-an

Out of the land of the morning sun,
Am-ra the Ta-an came.
Outlawed by the priests of the Ta-an,
His people spoke not his name.
Am-ra, the mighty hunter,
Am-ra, son of the spear,
Strong and bold as a lion,
Lithe and swift as a deer.
Into the land of the tiger,
Came Am-ra the fearless, alone,
With his bow of pliant lance-wood,
And his spear with the point of stone.

He saw the deer and the bison,
The wild horse and the bear,
The elephant and the mammoth,
To him the land seemed fair.
Face to face met he the tiger,
And gripping his spear's long haft,
Gazed fearless into the snarling face,
"Good hunting!" cried he, and laughed!
The bison he smote at sunrise,
The deer in the heat of day,
The wild horse fell before him,
The cave-bear did he slay!

A cave sought he? Not Am-ra!
He lived as wild and free,
As the wolf that roams the forest,
His only roof a tree.
When he wished to eat he slaughtered,

But not needlessly he slew,
For he felt a brother to the wild folk,
And this the Wild Folk knew.
The deer they spoke to Am-ra,
Of kin by the tiger slain,
Am-ra met the tiger,
And slew him on the plain!

A youth in the land of the Ta-an,
A slim, young warrior, Gaur,
Had followed Am-ra in the chase,
And fought by his side in war.
He yearned for his friend Am-ra
And he hated the high priest's face,
Till at last with the spear he smote him,
And fled from the land of his birth race.
Am-ra's foot-prints he followed,
And he wandered far away,
Till he came to the land of the tiger,
In the gateway of the day.

Into the land of the tiger,
There came an alien race,
Stocky and swart and savage,
Black of body and face.
Into the country of Am-ra,
Wandered the savage band,
No bows they bore but each carried
A stone-tipped spear in his hand.
They paused in Am-ra's country,
And camped at his clear spring fair,
And they slew the deer and the wild horse,
But fled from the tiger and bear.

Back from a hunt came Am-ra,
With the pelt of a grizzly bear,
He went to the spring of clear water
And he found the black men there.
More like apes than men were they,
They knew not the use of the bow,
They tore their meat and ate it raw
For fire they did not know.
Then angry waxed bold Am-ra,
Furious grew he then,
For he would not share his country
With a band of black ape-men.

The Tale of Am-ra

When the days are short and the nights are long in the country of the people of the caves, and the snow covers hill and valley and one may cross the River of Pleasant Water on the ice, then the people of the caves gather about the fire of old Gaur, to listen to his legends and folk-lore and his tales of his youth. Wise and shrewd was old Gaur. Cunning in hunting-craft. His cave was hung with hides of elk and bear and tiger and lion, cunningly and skillfully tanned and dressed. On the walls there hung and against the walls there leaned, antlers of elk and moose, horns of buffalo and musk-ox and tusks of rhinoceros and mammoth and walrus, the ivory beautifully polished, much of it of it carved, depicting love and war and the chase, for Gaur was skilled in the mystery of picture making and cunning with the tools of the art. Skilled in war also, was Gaur. The walls of his cave were hung with weapons, skillfully wrought, trophies of the wars of Gaurs youth when he went forth to fight the black men and the tribes of the sea and the hairy ape-men and the Sons of the Eagle. Skilled in many things was Gaur.

Untitled and Unfinished Fragment

A land of wild, fantastic beauty; of mighty trees and great rivers, of tangled, breathless jungle and boundless, unlimited prairies, of towering, awesome crags, and dank, gloomy, fever-ridden swamps, of reeking, far stretching savannas, and of great lakes. A land of pleasant summer and cruel, merciless winter. A land of beauty and terror. A land of wild beasts and wilder men. Mighty beasts roamed the mountains and the plains and jungle. Through the nights walked Na-go-sa-na, the tawny one, the Fear That Walks By Night, and Sa-go-na, the cruel sabertooth. Often upon the plains and among the brakes of the savannas, might be seen the gigantic form of Ga-so-go, the mammoth, the Hill That Walks. Among the savannas and in the jungle, Gola-ha, the Beast That Carries A Horn On His Nose, fought for supremacy with the A-go-nun, the Red One, the cone horned monster of another age. In the swamps and the deep jungle lived the Crawling Ones. The bearers of the Burning Death. And in the swamps and amid the deepest savanna reigned the E-ha-g-don, the frightful monsters of an earlier epoch–the dinosaurs. Such was the land in which dwelt my people, the Ta-an.

Through the plain and savanna and into an estuary, flowed a great river, The River of Blue Water. On one side of the river, the south side, rose moderately high cliffs. These cliffs rose abruptly, some yards back from the steep bank of the river. The top was rounded, sloping back steeply into the plain and ending in a drop of some score feet. In the cliff fronting the river were three tiers of caves, one tier above the other; and in these caves lived the tribe. The Ta-an numbered some one hundred and fifty strong. Most of these, of course, were women and children but there were at least seventy-five A-ga-nai, fighting men.

Ai, what a life that was! A life of battle; a life through which Fear stalked rampant from birth to death. For man was weak and helpless in those days, and Fear walked always by his side, and at night It lay down by his side. Even in sleep it did not depart from him but accompanied him in his troubled rest and haunted his dreams, so that in the midst of night he would start suddenly awake gripping his rude weapons and the cold sweat starting from his brow. For even as man's waking thoughts were of Fear, so his dreams were of Fear. Through life man went in those early days, peering, creeping, cautiously, ready, always, to flee or fight like a cornered rat. His days, he passed in fear and watchfulness and his nights in troubled sleep and frightful dreams–dreams through which Fear stalked grisly and horrible. Thus through life he went and at last in a moment of carelessness–a sudden movement in the long

grass or the bushes or the branches overhead, a great body launching through the air, an instant of awful agony and ghastly fear, and then the sound of bones crunching between mighty jaws. Or else, the rush of a heavy form across the ground, the quick lightning-like striking of a snake, the crash of a falling tree, the snapping that proceeds the parting of a rotten limb, these things heralded Death. Violent, sudden death.

In summer, pleasant was the land of the Ta-ans, except for the Fear. The much fruit was on the trees and the wild blueberries flourished at the edge of the swamps. The streams and rivers abounded in So-ga, the fish and the tribesmen caught them with slivers of bone tied to the end of a long fiber or a strip of rawhide. Ba-a the deer and O-ha the Swift One, blackened the plain with their numbers and among the forest wandered in great droves, Go-un the Grunter. The killers were gorged on the flesh of the grass-eaters and their attacks on man were less frequent. Man, too, feasted on the hoofed ones for so numerous were they, and so fat on the long, rank grass and the other rich vegetation, that they were careless of danger and unwary and the hunting was good. The tribesmen slew and slew, and what they did not eat on the spot, they cut in long strips to dry before the cave fires for winter. The trees and the undergrowth of jungle and forest were green and pleasant. The hills and crags were covered with a green covering of vegetation which softened their harsh and rugged outline.

[…]

Untitled and Incomplete Fragment

[…]
determined.

So I set out up the hill-trail as if on a hunt and was pleased to note that she was following me. When I came to a rather wild, craggy place among the hill, I walked around a great boulder and then turned back on the trail and waited, with a certain glee. Ah-lala came face to face with me before she knew I was about. I caught her by the wrists and dragged her along the trail for some distance before she came to herself, so astonished she was, and then she fought like a little demon.

Smiling, I over-powered her with ease, and presently she ceased to struggle and stood, glaring at me furiously.

“Beast!” she quoth, “Let me go!”

“Zukor Na, little wildcat.” I taunted her.

She stamped her little foot passionately, “Dont you call me that!” she blazed.

I laughed and glanced about, not finding what I wanted.

“What are you going to do to me?” she asked, somewhat frightently.

“What I should have done long ago.” I answered, “Spank you.”

“You shant!” she screamed, “You shant spank me.”

“Will you promise to leave me alone?” I asked her, hoping she would.

“No!” she answered sulkily, like an indulged child.

So in spite of her struggles and protests I tucked her under one arm and strode up the trail, despising myself but still determined.

When I came to where some bushes grew beside the trail, I stopped and set the girl down. Holding both her wrists with one hand, I broke off several long twigs. I felt that what I was doing was degrading and debasing myself and that I would never have the same self-respect, but I felt forced to go on with what I had started. Woman-whipping was not a custom among the tribes of the Magnard although it was common enough. It had always been repellant to me but none of the tribe thought it improper to spank a child who deserved it, no matter what age or sex. I considered Ah-lala as no more than a naughty child and certainly I had had enough provocation.

She watched me without struggling until I bunched the twigs in my hand and drew her in front of me. Then she fought with a desperation that startled me. When I had quelled her rebellion she panted, “You beast! To whip a woman!”

I laughed, “Who mentioned whipping a woman? Anyone may switch a naughty child.”

The rage that blazed from her small face was so furious and concentrated that I involuntarily drew back a step. Her eyes fairly blazed, her pretty lip drew back from her small teeth in a surprizing manner. For a moment she glared at me in fury and then turned away as much as my grip on her arm would allow, refusing to looking. I was becoming more bewildered every instant at the surprizing girl. I drew her toward me and was further suprized to see her eyeing me with a reproachful gaze. I found it difficult to meet that level gaze, although I knew and she knew that she deserved a whipping if a girl every did. But her clear eyes made me feel as if I were about to murder an innocent baby.

I expected her to begin to fight again, but she had changed her whole manner.

To my wonder she assumed a humble air that discomforted me more than any of her other moods.

“Please dont whip me, Am-ra.” she begged, timidly trying to free her hands and then desisting, “Dont, please. Dont shame me so, I beg you.”

I wavered.

“Am-ra,” she said, wearily, it seemed, “if you whip me I’ll hate you always.”

Of all the ridiculous pleas! Yet somehow it shamed me more than anything else she said.

Then, angry with myself and angry at her for confusing me so, I jerked her around with no very gentle hand and raised the switches. All such furore over the switching of a young girl scarcely out of the spanking age. Remember, before you condemn me, that in that age all was primitive and direct. We were lusty animals and what would horrify people of a civilized age were but commonplaces in that age.

Yet as I looked upon the girl I held so helpless in my grasp, I knew I could not bring the switch across that slim, shrinking form. With a snarl of disgust at my own weakness, I threw the switches away.

“I wont whip you, child.” I said kindly, and Ah-lala opened her eyes which she had tightly closed when I started to whip her.

She tugged to free herself, “Then please let me go.” she begged.

“Wait.” said I, “First tell me why you have tormented me so much. Surely I never offended you.”

“You did, too.” she answered, indinantly.

“Then how, in the name of the White Wolf?” I asked bewilderedly.

She hung her head and would not answer for awhile, then she suddenly

burst in speech so rapid and heated that I had some difficulty in grasping what she was saying.

“You never paid any attention to me.” she stormed, “You went on your way and didnt seem to know I was in the world! You took up all your time with

[…]

The Shadow Kingdom
(Draft)

The flare of the trumpets grew louder, like a deep golden thunder, and silver hoofs chimed rhythmically. The throng shouted, women flung roses from the roofs, as the first of the mighty array swung into view in the broad white street that curved round the golden spired Tower of Splendor.

First came the trumpeters, slim youths, clad in scarlet, riding with a flourish of long, golden trumpets; next the bowmen, tall men from the mountains; behind them the heavily armed footmen, their broad shields clashing in unison, their long spears swaying in perfect rythm to their stride. Behind them came the mightiest soldiery in all the world, The Red Slayers, horsemen, splendidly mounted, armed in red from helmet to spur. Proudly they sat their steeds, looking niether to right nor to left, but exultantly aware of the shouting for all that. They seemed like bronze statues, men of metal, and there was not a waver in the forest of spears that reared above them.

Behind these, came the motley ranks of the mercenaries, fierce, wild looking warriors, men of Mu and of Kaa-u and of the hills of the east and the isles of the west. They bore spears and swords and a compact group that marched somewhat apart from the rest, were the bowmen of Lemuria. Then came the nations light foot soldiery, and more trumpeters brought up the rear.

A brave sight, and a sight which aroused a fierce thrill in the soul of Kull, king of Valusia. Not on the Topaz Throne at the front of the regal Tower of Splendor sat Kull, but in the saddle, mounted on a great stallion, a true warrior king. His mighty arm swung up in reply to the salutes as the hosts passed. His fierce eyes passed the gorgeous trumpeters with a casual glance, rested longer on the following soldiery; they lit with a ferocious light as the Red Slayers halted in front of him with a clang of arms and a rearing of steeds, and tendered him the Crown Salute; they narrowed slightly as the mercenaries strode by.

They saluted no one, the mercenaries. They walked with shoulders flung back eyeing Kull boldly and straightly, albeit with a certain appreciation due a fighting man, fierce eyes, unblinking, staring from beneath shaggy manes.

And Kull returned a like stare. He granted much to brave men, and there were no braver in all the world, not even among the wild tribesmen who now disowned him. But Kull was too much the savage to have any great love for those. There were too many feuds. Many were age old enemies of Kull’s tribe and though the name of Kull was now a word accursed among the mountains and valleys of his people, and though Kull had put them from his mind, et still

the old hates, the ancient passions lingered. For Kull was no Valusian but an Atlantean.

The armies swung out of sight down the broad white street that led to the barracks and Kull reined his stallion about and started toward the palace at an easy gait, discussing the review with the commanders that rode with him, using not many words, but saying much.

“That is a mighty army.” said he, “But an army is like a sword and must not be allowed to rust.”

So down the street they rode, and Kull gave no heed to any of the whispers that reached his hearing from the throngs that still swarmed the streets.

“That is Kull, see! Valka! But what a king! And what a man! Look at his shoulders! His arms!”

And an undertone of more sinister whispers; “Kull! Ha, accursed usurper from the pagan isles–”

“Aye, shame to Valusia that a barbarian sits in the Throne of Kings–”

Little did Kull heed. Heavy handed had he seized the decaying throne of ancient Valusia and with a heavier hand did he hold it, a man against a nation.

After the council chamber, the social palace, where Kull curtesously replied to the formal and laudatory phrases of the lords and ladies, with carefully hidden, grim amusement at such frivolities.

Then the lords and ladies took their formal departure, and Kull leaned back on the ermine throne and contemplated matters of state until an attendant requested permission from the great king to speak, and announced an emissary from the Pictish embassy.

Kull brought his mind back from the dim mazes of Valusian state craft where it had been wandering, and gazed upon the Pict with little favor.

The man returned the gaze of the king without flinching. He was a strongly built warrior of medium height, dark, like all his race and possesing strong immobile features, from which gazed dauntless inscrutable eyes.

“The chief of Councillors, Ka-nu of the tribes, sends greetings and says: There is a throne at the feast of the rising moon for Kull, king of Valusia.”

“Good.” answered Kull, “Say to Ka-nu the Ancient, ambassador of the western isles that the king of Valusia will quaff wine with him when the moon floats over the hills of Zalgara.”

“I have a word for the king; not,” with a contemptuous flirt of hand “for these slaves.”

Kull dismissed the attendants with a word, watching the Pict warily.

The man stepped nearer and lowered his voice: “Come alone to the feast tonight, lord king. Such was the word of my chief.”

The kings eyes narrowed. “Alone?”

“Aye.” They eyed each other silently, their mutual tribal enmity seething under their cloak of formality. Their mouths spoke the cultured words of a highly polished race, a race not their own, but from their eyes gleamed the primal traditions of the elemental savage. Kull might be the king of Valusia and the Pict might be an emissary to her courts, but there in the throne hall of Kings, two tribesmen glowered at each other, fierce, wary, while ghosts of wild wars and world-ancient feuds whispered to each.

To Kull was the advantage and he enjoyed it to it fullest extent.

Jaw resting on hand, Kull eyed the Pict, who stood like an image of bronze, head thrown back, eyes unflinching.

Across Kull’s lips crept a smile that was more a sneer.

“And so.” said he, “I am to come alone?” Civilization had taught him to speak by inuendo and the Pict’s eyes glittered. But he made no reply.

“How do I know you come from Ka-nu?”

“I have spoken.” the man answered sullenly.

“And when did a Pict speak truth?” sneered Kull, being fully aware that the Picts did not lie, but using this means to anger the man.

“I see your plan, king.” the Pict answered imperturbably, “You wish to enrage me. Very good. You need go no further. I am enraged enough. And I challenge you to meet me in single battle, spear, sword or dagger, mounted or afoot. Are you king or man?”

Kull’s eyes glinted in grudging admiration, the kind that a fighting man must needs give another, but he did not fail to take the chance of further annoying his antagonist.

“A king does not accept the challenge of a nameless barbarian.” he sneered, “Nor does the emperor of Valusia break the Truce of Ambassadors. You have leave to go. Say to Ka-nu I will come–alone.”

The Picts eyes flashed murderously. He fairly shook in the grasp of the primal blood-lust; then turning his back squarely upon the king of Valusia, he strode across the Hall of Society and vanished through the great doorway.

Again Kull leaned back on the ermine throne and mused. So the chief of the Picts of Council wished him to come alone? For what reason? Treachery? Grimly Kull touched the hilt of his great sword. But scarcely. The Picts valued too greatly the alliance with Valusia to break it for any feudal reason. Kull might be a warrior of Atlantis and the hereditary enemy of Picts, but he was king of Valusia and their most potent ally. Kull reflected on the strange state of affairs that made him ally of ancient foes and foe of ancient friends. Then he rose and paced restlessly across the hall. Chains of friendship, tribe and tradition he had broken to satisfy his ambition.

[…]

Kull sank back, yet gazed about him warily.

“There speaks the savage.” said Ka-nu, “Think you if I planned treachery I would enact it here where suspicion would be sure to fall upon me? Tut. You young tribesmen have much to learn. There were my chiefs who were not at ease because you were born among the hills of Atlantis; and you despise me in your mind because I am a Pict. Tut. I see you as Kull, king of Valusia, not as Kull, the reckless Atlantean who single handed defeated the raiders of Skan. So should you see in me, not a Pict but an international man, a figure of the world. Now to that figure, hark! If you were slain tomorrow who would be king?”

“Kanuub, baron of Blal.”

“Even so. I object to Kanuub for many reasons. Yet this most of all; Kanuub is but a figure-head.”

“A figure head! How so? He was my greatest opposer, but I knew not that he championed any cause but his own. How a figure-head.”

Ka-nu’s eyes still twinkled, but there was a calculating light in them, and he quoted a saying of his people to the effect that laughter wastes words.

“But I will not laugh at you.”

“The wind can hear.” answered Ka-nu obliquely, “There are cycles within cycles. But you may trust me and you may trust Brul, the Spear-slayer. Look,” he drew from among his robes a bracelet, of gold, representing a winged dragon coiled thrice, with three horns of ruby on the head. “Examine it closely Kull. Brul will wear it on his arm when he comes to you tomorrow night so that ye may know him. Listen, trust Brul as you trust yourself and do that which he tells you. And in proof of trust, look ye!”

With the quickness of a striking hawk, the ancient snatched something from his robes, something that flung a weird green light over them, then as hastily replaced.

“The stolen gem!” explained Kull, recoiling, “The green gem from the Temple of the Serpent! Valka! You! And why do you show it to me?”

Delcardes' Cat

King Kull went with Ku, chief councillor of the throne, to see the talking cat of Delcardes, for though a cat a may look at a king, it is not given every king to look at a cat like Delcardes'.

Kull was skeptical and Ku was wary and suspicious without knowing why, but years of counter-plot and intrigue had soured him. He swore testily that a talking cat was a snare and a fraud, a swindle and a delusion and maintained that should such a thing exist, it was a direct insult to the gods, who ordained that only man should enjoy the power of speech.

But Kull knew that in the old times beasts had talked to men for he had heard the legends, handed down from his barbarian ancestors. So he was skeptical but open to conviction.

Delcardes helped the conviction. She lounged with supple ease upon her silk couch, herself like a great beautiful feline, and looked at Kull from under long drooping lashes, which lended unimaginable charm to her narrow, piquantly slanted eyes.

Her lips were full and red and usually as at present, curved in a faint enigmatical smile and her silken garments and ornaments of gold and gems hid little of her glorious figure.

But Kull was not interested in women. He ruled Valusia but for all that he was an Atlantean and a ferocious savage in the eyes of his subjects. War and conquest held his attention, together with keeping his feet on the ever rocking throne of the ancient empire, and the task of learning the ways, customs and thoughts of the people he ruled.

To Kull, Delcardes was a mysterious and queenly figure, alluring, yet surrounded by a haze of ancient wisdom and womanly magic.

To Ku, chief councillor, she was a woman and therefore the latent base of intrigue and danger.

To Ka-nanu, Pictish ambassador and Kull's closest adviser, she was an eager child, parading under the effect of her show-acting; but Kananu was not there when Kull came to see the talking cat.

The cat lolled on a silken cushion, on a couch of her own and surveyed the king with inscrutable eyes. Her name was Saremes and she had a slave who stood behind her, ready to do her bidding, a lanky man who kept the lower part of his face half concealed by a thin veil which fell to his chest.

"King Kull," said Delcardes, "I crave a boon of you–before Saremes begins to speak–when I must be silent."

"You may speak." Kull answered.

The girl smiled eagerly, and clasped her hands.

“Let me marry Kulra Thoom of Zarfhaana!”

Tu broke in as Kull was about to speak.

“My lord, this matter has been thrashed out at lengths before! I thought there was some purpose in requesting this visit! This–this girl has a strain of royal blood in her and it is against the custom of Valusia that royal women should marry foreigners of lower rank.”

“But the king can rule otherwise.” pouted Delcardes.

“My lord,” said Tu, spreading his hands as one in the last stages of nervous irritation, “If she marries thus it is like to cause war and rebellion and discord for the next hundred years.”

He was about to plunge into a dissartation on rank, geniology and history but Kull interupted, his short stock of patience exhausted:

“Valka and Hotath! Am I an old woman or a priest to be bedevilled with such affairs? Settle it between yourselves and vex me no more with questions of mating! By Valka, in Atlantis men and women marry whom they please and none else Delcardes pouted a little, made a face at Tu who scowled back, then smile sunnily and turned on her couch with a lissome movement.

“Talk to Saremes, Kull, she will grow jealous of me.”

Kull eyed the cat uncertainly. Her fur was long, silky and grey, her eyes slanting and mysterious.

“She is very young, Kull, yet she is very old.” said Delcardes, “She is a cat of the Old Race who lived to be thousands of years old. Ask her her age, Kull.

How many years have you seen, Saremes?” asked Kully idly.

“Valusia was young when I was old.” the cat answered in a clear though curiously timbered voice.

Kull started violently.

“Valka and Hotath!” he swore, “She talks!”

Delcardes laughed softly in pure enjoyment but the expression of the cat never altered.

“I talk, I think, I know, *I am*.” she said, “I have been the ally of queens and the councillor of kings ages before even the white beaches of Atlantis knew your feet, Kull of Valusia. I saw the ancestors of the Valusians ride out of the far east to trample down the Old Race and I was here when the Old Race came up out of the oceans so many eons ago that the mind of man reels when seeking to measure them.

“I have seen empires rise and kingdoms fall and kings ride in on their steeds and out on their shields. Aye, I have been a goddess in my time and strange were the neophites who bowed before me and terrible were the rites

which were performed in my worship to pleasure me. For of eld beings exalted my kind, beings as strange as their deeds."

"Can you read the stars and foretell events?" Kull's barbarian mind leaped at once to material ideas.

"Aye; the books of the past and the future are open to me and I tell man what is good for him to know."

"Then tell me," said Kull, "Where I misplaced the secret letter from Kananu yesterday."

"You thrust it into the bottom of your dagger scabbard and then instantly forgot it." the cat replied.

Kull started, snatched out his dagger and shook the sheath. A thin strip of folded parchment tumbled out.

"Valka and Hotath!" he swore, "Saremes, you are a witch of cats! Mark ye, Tu!"

But Tu's lips were pressed in a straight, dissapproving line and he eyed Delcardes darkly.

She returned his stare guilessly and he turned to Kull in irritation.

"My lord, consider! This is all mummery of some sort."

"Tu, none saw me hide that letter for I myself had forgotten."

"Lord king, any spy might–"

"Spy? Be not a greater fool than you were born, Tu. Shall a cat set spies to watch me hide letters?"

Tu sighed. As he grew older it was becoming increasingly difficult to refrain from showing exasperation toward kings.

"My lord, give thought to the humans who may be behind the cat!"

"Lord Tu," said Delcardes in a tone of gentle reproach, "You put me to shame and you offend Saremes."

Kull felt vaguely angered at Tu.

"At least, Tu," said he, "The cat talks; that you cannot deny."

"There is some trickery." Tu stubbornly maintained, "Man talks; beasts may not."

"Not so," said Kull, himself convinced of the reality of the talking cat and anxious to prove the rightness of his belief, "A lion talked to Kambra and birds have spoken to the old men of the sea-mountain tribes, telling them where game was hidden.

"None denies that beasts talk among themselves. Many a night have I lain on the slopes of the forest covered hills or out on the grassy savannahs and have heard the tigers roaring to one another across the star-light. Then why should some beast not learn the speech of man? There have been times when I could almost understand the roaring of the tigers. The tiger is my totem and is

tambu to me save in self defense.” he added irrevelently.

Tu squirmed. This talk of totem and tambu was good enough in a savage chief, but to hear such remarks from the king of Valusia irked him extremely.

“My lord,” said he, “A cat is not a tiger.”

“Very true.” said Kull, “And this one is wiser than all tigers.”

“That is naught but truth,” said Saremes calmly,

Lord Chanceller, would you believe then, if I told you what was at this moment transpiring at the royal treasury?”

“No!” Tu snarled, “Clever spies may learn anything as I have found.”

“No man can be convinced when he will not.” said Saremes imperturbably, quoting a very old Valusian saying, “Yet know, lord Tu that a surplus of twenty gold tals has been discovered and a courier is even now hastening through the streets to tell you of it. Ah,” as a step sounded in the corridor without, “even now he comes.”

A slim courtier, clad in the gay garments of the royal treasury, entered, bowing deeply, and craved permission to speak. Kull having granted it, he said:

“Mighty king and lord Tu, a surplus of twenty tals of gold has been found in the royal monies.”

Delcardes laughed and clapped her hands delightedly but Tu merely scowled.

“When was this discovered?”

“A scant half hour ago.”

“How many have been told of it?”

“None, my lord. Only I and the Royal Treasurer have known until just now when I told you, my lord.”

“Humph!” Tu waved him aside sourly, “Begone. I will see about this matter later.”

“Delcardes,” said Kull, “This cat is yours, is she not?”

“Lord king,” answered the girl, “No one owns Saremes. She only bestows on me the honor of her presence; she is a guest. As for the rest she is her own mistress and has been for a thousand years.”

“I would that I might keep her in the palace.” said Kull.

“Saremes,” said Delcardes deferentially, “The king would have you as his guest.”

“I will go with the king of Valusia.” said the cat with dignity, “And remain in the royal palace until such time as it shall pleasure me to go elsewhere. For I am a great traveller, Kull, and it pleases me at times to go out over the world-path and walk the streets of cities where in ages gone I have roamed forests, and to tread the sands of deserts where long ago I trod imperial

streets.”

So Saremes the talking cat came to the royal palace of Valusia. Her slave accompanied her and she was given a spacious chamber, lined with fine couches and silken pillars. The best viands of the royal table were placed before her daily and all the household of the king did homage to her except Tu who grumbled to see a cat exalted, even a talking cat. Saremes treated him with amused contempt but admitted Kull into a level of dignified equallity.

She quite often came into his throne chamber, borne on a silken cushion by her slave who must always accompany her, no matter where she went.

At other times Kull came into her chamber and they talked into the dim hours of dawn and many were the tales she told him and ancient the wisdom that she imparted. Kull listened with interest and attention for it was evident that this cat was wiser far than many of his councillors, and had gained more antique wisdom than all of them together. Her words were pithy and oracular and she refused to prophesy beyond minor affairs taking place in the every day life of the palace, and kingdom.

“For” said she, “I who have lived more years than you shall live minutes, know that man is better without knowledge of things to come, for what is to be will be, and man can neither avert not hasten. It is better to go in the dark when the road must pass a lion and there is no other road.”

“Yet,” said Kull, “if what must be is to be–a thing which I doubt–and a man be told what things shall come to pass and his arm weakened or strengthened thereby, then was not that too, foreordained?”

“If he was ordained to be told.” said Saremes, adding to Kull’s perplexity and doubt, “However, not all of life’s roads are set fast, for a man may do this or a man may do that and not even the gods know the mind of a man.”

“Then,” said Kull dubiously, “All things are not destined, if there be more than one road for a man to follow. And how can events then be prophesies truly?

Life has many roads, Kull,” answered Saremes, “I stand at the cross-roads of the world and I know what lies down each road. Still, not even the gods know what road a man will take, whether the right hand or the left hand, when he comes to the deviding of the ways, and once started upon a road he cannot retrace his steps.”

“Then, in Valka’s name,” said Kull, “Why not point out to me the perils or the advantages of each road as it comes and aid me in choosing?”

“Because there are bounds set upon the powers of such as I.” the cat replied, “Lest we hinder the workings of the alchemy of the gods. We may not brush the veil entirely aside for human eyes, lest the gods take our power from us and lest we do harm to man. For though there are many roads at each

cross roads, still a man must take one of those and sometimes one is no better than another. So Hope flickers her lamp along one road and man follows, though that road may be the foulest of all."

Then she continued, seeing Kull found it difficult to understand.

"You see, lord king, that our powers must have limits, else we might grow too powerful and threaten the gods. So a mystic spell is laid upon us and while we may open the books of the past, we may but grant flying glances of the future, through the mist that veils it."

Kull felt somehow that the argument of Saremes was rather flimsy and illogical, smacking of witch-craft and mummery, but with Saremes' cold, oblique eyes gazing unwinkingly at him, he was not prone to offer any objections, even had he thought of any.

"Now," said the cat, "I will draw aside the veil for an instant to your own good–let Delcardes marry Kulra Thoom."

Kull rose with an impatient twitch of his mighty shoulders.

"I will have naught to do with a woman's mating. Let Tu attend to it."

Yet Kull slept on the thought and as Saremes wove the advice craftily into her phillosophizing and moralizing in days to come, Kull weakened.

A strange sight it was, indeed, to see Kull, his chin resting on his great fist, leaning forward and drinking in the distinct intonation of the cat Saremes as she lay curled on her silken cushion, or stretched languidly at full length–as she talked of mysterious and fascinating subjects, her eyes glinting strangely and her lips scarcely moving, while the slave Kuthulos stood behind her like a statue, motionless and speechless.

Kull highly valued her opinions and he was prone to ask her advice–which she gave warily or not at all–on matters of state. Still, Kull found that what she advised usually coincided with his private wishes and he began to wonder if she were not a mind reader also.

Kuthulos irked him with his gauntness, his motionlessness and his silence but Saremes would have none other to attend her. Kull strove to pierce the veil that masked the man's features, but though it seemed thin enough, he could tell nothing of the face beneath and out of curtesy to Saremes, never asked Kuthulos to unviel.

Kull came to the chamber of Saremes one day and she looked at him with enigmatical eyes. The masked slave stood statue like behind her.

"Kull," said she, "again I will tear the veil for you; Brule, the Pictish Spear-slayer, warrior of Ka-nanu and your friend, has just been haled beneath the surface of The Forbidden Lake by a grisly monster."

Kull sprang up, cursing in rage and alarm.

"Brule? Valka's name, what was he doing about the Forbidden Lake?"

“He was swimming there. Hasten, you may yet save him, even though he be borne to the Enchanted Land which lies below the Lake.”

Kull whirled toward the door. He was startled but not so much as he would have been had the swimmer been someone else, for he knew the reckless irreverence of the Pict, chief among Valusia’s most powerful allies.

He started to shout for guards when Saremes’ voice stayed him:

“Nay, my lord. You had best go alone. Not even your command might make men accompany you into the waters of that grim lake and by the custom of Valusia, it is death for any man to enter there save the king.”

“Aye, I will go alone.” said Kull, “And thus save Brule from the anger of the people, should he chance to escape the monsters; inform Kananu!”

Kull, discouraging respectful inquiries with wordless snarls, mounted his grat stallion and rode out of Valusia at full speed. He rode alone and he ordered none to follow him. That which he had to do, he could do alone, and he did not wish anyone to see when he brought Brule or Brule’s corpse out of the Forbidden Lake. He cursed the reckless inconsiderateness of the Pict and he cursed the tambu which hung over the Lake, the violation of which might cause rebellion among the Valusians.

Twilight was stealing down from the mountains of Zalgara when Kull halted his horse on the shores of the lake. There was certainly nothing forbidding in its appearance, for its waters spread blue and placid from beach to wide white beach and the tiny island rising above its bosom seemed like gems of emerald and jade. A faint shimmering mist rose from it, enhancing the air of lazy unreality which lay about the regions of the lake. Kull listened intently for a moment and it seemed to him as though faint and far away music breathed up through the sapphire waters.

He cursed impatiently, wondering if he were beginning to be bewitched, and flung aside all garments and ornaments except his girdle, loin clout and sword. He waded out into the shimmery blueness until it lapped his thighs, then knowing that the depth swiftly increased, he drew a deep breath and dived.

As he swam down through the sapphire glimmer, he had time to reflect that this was probably a fool’s errand. He might have taken time to find from Saremes just where Brule had been swimming when attacked and whether he was destined to rescue the warrior or not. Still, he thought that the cat might not have told him, and even if she had assured him of failure, he would have attempted what he was now doing, anyway. So there was truth in Saremes’ saying that men were better untold then.

As for the location of the lake-battle, the monster might have dragged Brule anywhere. He intended to explore the lake bed until–

Even as he ruminated thus, a shadow flashed by him, a vague shimmer in the jade and sapphire shimmer of the lake. He was aware that other shadows swept by him on all sides, but he could not make out their form.

Far beneath him he began to see the glimmer of the lake bottom which seemed to glow with a strange radiance. Now the shadows were all about him; they wove a serpentine about and in front of him, an ever-changing thousand-hued glittering web of color. The water here burned topaz and the things wavered and scintillated in its faery splendor. Like the shades and shadows of colors they were, vague and unreal, yet opaque and gleaming.

However, Kull, deciding that they had no intention of attacking him, gave them no more attention but directed his gaze on the lake floor, which his feet just then struck, lightly. He started, and could have sworn that he had landed on a living creature for he felt a rhythmic movement beneath his bare feet. The faint glow was evident there at the bottom of the lake–as far as he could see stretching away on all sides until it faded into the lambent sapphire shadows, the lake floor was one solid level of fire, that faded and glowed with unceasing regularity. Kull bent closer–the floor was covered by a sort of short moss-like substance which shone like white flame. It was as if the lake bed were covered with myriads of fire-flies which raised and lowered their wings together. And this moss throbbed beneath his feet like a living thing.

Now Kull began to swim upward again. Raised among the sea-mountains of ocean-girt Atlantis, he was like a sea-creature himself. As much at home in the water as any Lemurian, he could remain under the surface twice as long as the ordinary swimmer, but this lake was deep and he wished to conserve his strength.

He came to the top, filled his enormous chest with air and dived again. Again the shadows swept about him, almost dazzling his eyes with their ghostly gleams. He swam faster this time and having reached the bottom, he began to walk along it, as fast as the clinging substance about his limbs would allow, the while the fire-moss breathed and glowed and the color things flashed about him and monstrous, nightmare shadows fell across his shoulder upon the burning floor, flung by unseen beings.

The moss was littered by the skulls and the bones of men who had dared the Forbidden Lake and suddenly with a silent swirl of the waters, a thing rushed upon Kull. At first the king thought it to be a huge octopus for the body was that of an octopus, with long waving tentacles, but as it charged upon him he saw it had legs like a man and a hideous semi-human face leered at him from among the writhing snaky arms of the monster.

Kull braced his feet and as he felt the cruel tentacles whip about his limbs, he thrust his sword with cool accuracy into the midst of that demoniac face

and the creature lumbered down and died at his feet with grisly soundless gibbering. Blood spread like a mist about him and Kull thrust strongly against the floor with his legs and shot upward.

He burst into the fast fading light and even as he did a great form came skimming across the water toward him–a water spider but this one was larger than a horse and its great cold eyes gleamed Hellishly. Kull, keeping himself afloat with his feet and one hand, raised his sword and as the spider rushed in, he cleft it half way through the body and it sank silently.

A slight noise made him turn and another, larger than the first was almost upon him. This one flung over the king's arms and shoulders, great strands of clinging web that would have meant doom for any but a giant. But Kull burst the grim shackles as if they had been strings and seizing a leg of the thing as it towered above him, he thrust the monster through again and again till it weakened in his grasp and floated away, reddening the blue waters.

"Valka!" muttered the king, "I am not like to go without employment here. Yet these things be easy to slay–how could they have overcome Brule, who in all the Seven Kingdoms is second only to me battle-might?"

But Kull was to find that grimmer spectres than these haunted the death-ridden abysses of Forbidden Lake. Again he dived and this time only the color-shadows and the bones of forgotten men met his glance. Again he rose for air and for the fourth time he dived.

He was not far from one of the islands and as he swam downward he wondered what strange things were hidden by the dense emerald foliage which cloaked these islands. Legend said that temples and shrines reared there that were never built by human hands and that on certain nights the lake beings came out of the deeps to enact eery rites there.

The rush came just as his feet struck the moss. It came from behind and Kull, warned by some primal instinct, whirled just in time to see a great form loom over him, a form neither man nor beast but horribly compounded of both–to feel gigantic fingers close on arm, and shoulder.

He struggled savagely but the thing held his sword arm helpless and its talons sank deeply into his left forearm. With a volcanic wrench he twisted about so that he could at least see his attacker. The thing was something like a monstrous shark but a long cruel horn, curved like a saber jutted up from its snout and it had four arms, human in shape but inhuman in size and strength and in the crooked talons of the fingers.

With two arms the monster held Kull helpless and with the other two it bent his head back, to break his spine. But not even such a grim being as this might so easily conquer Kull of Atlantis. A wild rage surged up in him and the king of Valusia went berserk.

Bracing his feet against the yielding moss, he tore his left arm free with a heave and wrench of his great shoulders. With cat-like speed he sought to shift the sword from right hand to left, and failing in this, struck savagely at the monster with clenched fist. But the mocking sapphirean stuff about him foiled him, breaking the force of his blow. The shark-man lowered his snout but before he could strike upward Kull gripped the horn with his left hand and held fast.

Then followed a test of might and endurance. Kull, unable to move with any speed in the water, knew his only hope was to keep in close and wrestle with his foe in such manner as to counterbalance the monster's quickness. He strove desperately to tear his sword arm loose and the shark-man was forced to grasp it will all four of his hands. Kull gripped the horn and dared not let got lest he be disembowlled with its terrible upward thrust, and the shark-man dared not release with a single hand, the arm that held Kull's long sword.

So they wrenched and wrestled and Kull saw that he was doomed if it went on in this manner. Already he was beginning to suffer for want of air. The gleam in the cold eyes of the shark-man told that he too recognized the fact that he had but to hold Kull below the surface until he drowned.

A desperate plight indeed, for any man. But Kull of Atlantis was no ordinary man. Trained from babyhood in a hard and bloody school, with steel muscles and dauntless brain bound together by the co-ordination that makes the superfighter, he added to this a courage which never faltered and a tigerish rage which on occasion swept him up to superhuman deeds.

So now, concious of his swiftly approaching doom and goaded to frenzy by his helplessness, he decided upon action as desperate as his need. He released the monster's horn at the same time bending his body as far back as he could and gripping the nearest arm of the thing with the free hand.

Instantly the shark-man struck, his horn ploughing along Kull's thigh and then–the luck of Atlantis!–wedging fast in Kull's heavy girdle. And as he tore it free, Kull sent his mighty strength through the fingers that held the monster's arm, and crushed clammy flesh and inhuman bone like rotten fruit between them.

The shark-man's mouth gaped silently with the torment and he struck again wildly. Kull avoided the blow and losing their balance they went down together, half-buoyed by the jade surge in which they wallowed. And as they tossed there, Kull tore his sword arm from the weakening grip and striking upward, split the monster open.

The whole battle had consumed only a very brief time but to Kull, as he swam upward, his head singing and a great weight seeming to press his ribs, it seemed like hours. He saw dimly that the lake floor shelved suddenly upward

close at hand and knew that it sloped to an island, the water became alive about him and he felt himself lapped from shoulder to heel in gigantic coils which even steel muscles could not break. His conciousness was fading–he felt himself borne along at terrific speed–there was a sound as of many bells–then suddenly he was above water and his tortured lungs were drinking in great draughts of air. He was whirling along through utter darkness and he had time only to take a long breath before he was again swept under.

Again light glowed about him and he saw the fire-moss throbbing far below. He was in the grasp of a great serpent who had flung a few lengths its sinuous body about him like huge cables and was now bearing him to what destination Valka alone knew.

Kull did not struggle, reserving his strength. If the snake did not keep him under water so long under water that he died, there would no doubt be a chance of battle in the creature's lair or where-ever he was being taken. As it was, Kull's limbs were pinioned so close that he could no more free an arm than he could have flown.

The serpent, racing through the blue deeps so swiftly, was the largest Kull had ever seen–a good two hundred feet of jade and golden scales, -vividly and wonderfully colored. Its eyes, when they turned toward Kull were like icy fire if such a thing can be. Even then Kull's imaginative soul was struck with the bizarreness of the scene; that great green and gold form flying through the burning topaz of the lake, while the shadow-colors weaved dazzingly about it.

The fire gemmed floor sloped upward again–either for an island of the lake shore, and a great cavern suddenly appeared before them. The snake glided into this–the fire-moss ceased and Kull found himself partly above the surface in unlighted darkness. He was borne along in this manner for what seemed a very long time, then the monster dived again.

Again they came up into light, but such light as Kull had never before seen. A luminous glow shimmered duskily over the face of the waters which lay dark and still. And Kull knew that he was in the Enchanted Domain under the bottom of Forbidden Lake for this was no earthly radiance; it was a black light, blacker than any darkness yet it lit the unholy waters so that he could see the dusky glimmer of them and his own dark reflection in them. The coils suddenly loosed from his limbs and he struck out for a vast bulk that loomed in the shadows in front of him.

Swimming strongly he approached, and saw that it was a great city. On a great level of black stone, it towered up and up until its sombre spires were lost in the blackness above the unhallowed light, which black also but of a different hue. Huge square-built massive buildings of mighty basaltic like blocks fronted him as he clambered out of the clammy waters and strode up

the steps which were cut into the stone, like steps in a wharf, and between the buildings columns rose gigantically.

No gleam of earthly light lessened the grimness of this inhuman city but from its walls and towers the black light flowed out over the waters in vast throbbing waves.

Kull was aware that in a wide space before him, where the buildings swept away on each side, a vast concourse of beings confronted him. He blinked, striving to accustom his eyes to the strange illumination. The beings came closer and a whisper ran among them like the waving of grass in the night wind. They were light and shadowy, glimmering against the blackness of their city and their eyes were eery and luminous.

Then the king saw that one of their number stood in front of the rest. This one was much like a man and his bearded face was high and noble but a frown hovered over his magnificent brows.

“You come like the forecursor of your race,” said this lake-man suddenly, “Bloody and bearing a red sword.”

Kull laughed angrily for this smacked of injustice.

“Valka and Hotath!” said the king, “Most of this blood is mine own and was let by things of your cursed lake.”

“Death and ruin follow the course of your race.” said the lake-man sombrely, “Do we not know? Aye, we reigned in the Lake of blue waters before man-kind was even a dream of the gods.”

“None molests you–” began Kull.

“They fear to. In the old days men of the earth sought to invade our dark kingdom. And we slew them and there was war between the sons of men and the people of the lakes. And we came forth and spread terror among the earthlings for we knew that they bore only death for us and that they yielded only to slaying. And we wove spells and charms and burst their brains and shattered their souls with our magic so they begged for peace and it was so. The men of earth laid a tambu on this lake so that no man may come here save the king of Valusia. That was thousands of years ago. No man has ever come into the Enchanted Land and gone forth, save as a corpse floating up through the still waters of the upper lake. King of Valusia or whoever you be, you are doomed.”

Kull snarled in defiance.

“I sought not your cursed kingdom. I seek Brule the Spear-slayer whom you dragged down.”

“You lie.” the lake-man answered, “No man has dared this lake for over a hundred years. You come seeking treasure or to ravish and slay like all your bloody-handed kind. You die!”

And Kull felt the whisperings of magic charms about him; they filled the air and took physical form, floating in the shimmering light like wispy spider-webs, clutching at him with vague tentacles. But Kull swore impatiently and swept them aside and out of existence with his bare hand. For against the fierce elemental logic of the savage, the magic of decadency had no force.

“You are young and strong.” said the lake-king, “The rot of civilization has not yet entered your soul and our charms may not harm you, because you do not understand them. Then we must try other things.”

And the lake-beings about him drew daggers and moved upon Kull. Then the king laughed and set his back against a column, gripping his sword hilt until the muscles stood out on his right arm in great ridges.

“This is a game I understand, ghosts.” he laughed.

They halted.

“Seek not to evade your doom.” said the king of the lake, “For we are immortal and may not be slain by mortal arms.”

“You lie, now.” answered Kull with the craft of the barbarian, “For by your own words you feared the death my kind brought among you. You may live forever but steel can slay you. Take thought among yourselves. You are soft and weak and unskilled in arms; your bear your blades unfamiliarly. I was born and bred to slaying. You will slay me for there are thousands of you and I but one, yet your charms have failed and many of you shall die before I fall. I will slaughter by the scores and the hundreds. Take thought, men of the lake, is my slaying worth the lives it will cost you?”

For Kull knew that beings who slay may be slain by steel and he was unafraid.

“Aye, consider.” he repeated, “is it better that you should bring Brule to me and let us go, or that my corpse shall lie amid sword-torn heaps of your dead when the battle-shout is silent? Nay, there be Picts and Lemurians among my mercenaries who will follow my trail even into the Forbidden Lake and will drench the Enchanted Land with your gore if I die here. For they have their own tambus and they reck not of the tambus of the civilized races nor care they what may happen to Valusia but think only of me who am of barbarian blood like themselves.”

“The old world reels down the road to ruin and forgetfullness.” brooded the lake-king, “and we that were all powerful in by-gone days must brook to be bearded in our own kingdom by an arrogant savage. Swear that you will never set foot in Forbidden Lake again, and that you will never let the tambu be broken by others and you shall go free.”

“First bring the Spear-slayer to me.”

“No such man has ever come to this lake.”

“Nay? The cat Saremes told me–”

“Saremes? Aye, we knew her of old when she came swimming down through the green waters and abode for some centuries in the courts of the Enchanted Land; the wisdom of the ages is hers but I knew not that she spoke the speech of earthly men. Still, there is no such man here and I swear–”

“Swear not by gods or devils.” Kull broke in, “Give your word as a true man.”

“I give it.” said the lake-king and Kull believed for there was a majesty and a bearing about the being which made Kull feel strangely small and rude.

“And I,” said Kull, “Give you my word–which has never been broken–that no man shall break the tambu or molest you in any way again.”

The lake-king replied with a stately inclination of his lordly head and a gesture of his hand.

“And I believe you, for you are different from any earthly man I ever knew. You are a real king and what is greater, a true man.”

Kull thanked him and sheathed his sword, turning toward the steps.

“Know ye how to gain the outer world, king of Valusia?”

“As to that,” answered Kull, “if I swim long enough I suppose I shall find the way. I know that the serpent brought me clear through at least one island and possibly many and that we swam in a cave for a long time.”

“You are bold.” said the lake-king, “But you might swim forever in the dark.”

He raised his hands and a behemoth swam to the foot of the steps.

“A grim steed,” said the lake-king, “but he will bear you safe to the very shore of the upper lake.”

“A moment,” said Kull, “am I at present beneath an island, or the mainland or is this land in truth beneath the lake floor?”

“You are at the center of universe as you are always. Time, place and space are illusions, having no existence save in the mind of man which must set limits and bounds in order to understand. There is only the underlying reality, of which all appearances are but outward manifestations, just as the upper lake is fed by the waters of this real one. Go now, king, for you are a true man even though you be the first wave of the rising tide of savagery which shall overwhelm the world ere it recedes.”

Kull listened respectfully, understanding little but realizing that this was high magic. He struck hands with the lake-king, shuddering a little at the feel of that which was flesh but not human flesh; then he looked once more at the great black buildings rearing silently and the murmuring moth-like forms among them, and he looked out over the shiny jet surface of the waters with the waves of black light crawling like spiders across it. And he turned and

went down the stair to the waters edge and sprang on the back of the behemoth.

Eons followed, of dark caves and rushing waters and the whisper of gigantic unseen monsters; sometimes above and sometimes below, the surface the behemoth bore the king and finally the fire-moss leaped up and they swept up through the blue of the burning water and Kull waded to land.

Kull's stallion stood patiently where the king had left him and the moon was just rising over the lake, whereat Kull swore amazedly.

"A scant hour ago, by Valka, I dismounted here! I had thought that many hours and possibly days had passed since then."

He mounted and rode toward the city of Valusia, reflecting that there might have been some meaning in the lake-king's remarks about the illusion of time.

Kull was weary, angry and bewildered. The journey through the lake had cleansed him of the blood, but the motion of riding started the gash in his thigh to bleeding again, moreover the leg was stiff and irked him somewhat. Still, the main question that presented itself, was that Saremes had lied to him and either through ignorance or through malicious forethought, had come near to sending him to his death. For what reason?

Kull cursed, reflecting what Tu would say and the chancellor's triumph. Still, even a talking cat might be innocently wrong but hereafter Kull determined to lay no weight to the words of such.

Kull rode into the silent silvery streets of the ancient city and the guard at the gate gaped at his appearance but wisely refrained from questioning.

He found the palace in an uproar. Swearing he stalked to his council chamber and thence to the chamber of the cat Saremes. The cat was there, curled imperturbably on her cushion, and grouped about the chamber, each striving to talk down the others, were Tu and the chief councillors. The slave Kuthulos was nowhere to be seen.

Kull was greeted by a wild acclamation of shouts and questions but he strode straight to Saremes' cushion and glared at her.

"Saremes," said the king, "You lied to me!"

The cat stared at him coldly, yawned and made no reply. Kull stood, nonplused and Tu seized his arm.

"Kull, where in Valka's name have you been? Whence this blood?"

Kull jerked loose irritably.

"Leave be." he snarled, "This cat sent me on a fool's errand–where is Brule?"

"Kull!"

The king whirled and saw Brule stride through the door, his scanty

garments stained by the dust of hard riding. The bronze features of the Pict were immobile but his dark eyes gleamed with relief.

“Name of seven devils!” said the warrior testily, to hide this emotion, “My riders have combed the hills and the forest for you–where have you been?”

“Searching the waters of Forbidden Lake for your worthless carcase.” answered Kull with grim enjoyment of the Pict’s perturbation.

“Forbidden Lake!” Brule exclaimed with the freedom of the savage, “Are you in your dotage? What would I be doing there? I accompanied Ka-nanu yesterday to the Zarfhaanan border and returned to hear Tu ordering out all the army to search for you. My men have since then ridden in every direction except the Forbidden Lake where we never thought of going.”

“Saremes lied to me–” Kull began.

But he was drowned out by a chatter of scolding voices, the main theme being that a king should never ride off so unceremoniously, leaving the kingdom to take care of itself.

“Silence!” roared Kull, lifting his arms, his eyes blazing dangerously, “Valka and Hotath! Am I an urchin to be rated for truancy? Tu, tell me what has occurred.”

In the sudden silence which followed this royal outburst, Tu began:

“My lord, we have been duped from the beginning. This cat, is as I have maintained, a delusion and a dangerous fraud.”

“Yet–”

“My lord, have you never heard of men who could hurl their voice to a distance, making it appear that another spoke, or that invisible voices sounded?”

Kull flushed. “Aye, by Valka! Fool that I should have forgotten! An old wizard of Lemuria had that gift. Yet who spoke–”

“Kuthulos!” exclaimed Tu, “Fool am I not to have remembered Kuthulos, a slave, aye, but the greatest scholar and the wisest man in all the Seven Empires. Slave of that she-fiend Delcardes who even now writhes on the rack!”

Kull gave a sharp exclamation.

“Aye!” said Tu grimly, “When I entered and found that you had ridden away, none knew where, I suspected treachery and I sat me down and thought hard. And I remembered Kuthulos and his art of voice-throwing and of how the false cat had told you small things but never great prophesies, giving false arguments for reason of refraining.

“So I knew that Delcardes had sent you this cat and Kuthulos to befool you and gain your confidence and finally send you to your doom. So I sent for Delcardes and ordered her put to the torture so that she might confess all. She

planned cunningly. Aye, Saremes must have her slave Kuthulos with her all the time–while he talked through her mouth and put strange ideas in your mind."

"Then where is Kuthulos?" asked Kull.

"He had dissapeared when I came to Saremes' chamber, and–"

"Ho, Kull!" a cheery voice boomed from the door and a bearded elfish figure strode in, accompanied by a slim, frightened girlish shape.

"Ka-nanu! Delcardes–so they did not torture you, after all!"

"Oh, my lord!" she ran to him and fell on her knees before him, clasping his feet, "oh, Kull," she wailed, "they accuse me of terrible things! I am guilty of dicieving you, my lord, but I meant no harm! I only wished to marry Kulra Thoom!"

Kull raised her to her feet, perplexed but pitying her evident terror and remorse.

"Kull," said Ka-nanu, "it is a good thing I returned when I did, else you and Tu had tossed the kingdom into the sea!"

Tu snarled wordlessly, always jealous of the Pictish ambassador, who was also Kull's adviser.

"I returned to find the whole palace in an uproar, men rushing hither and yon and falling over one another in doing nothing. I sent Brule and his riders to look for you, and going to the torture chamber–naturally I went first to to the torture chamber, since Tu was in charge–"

The chancellor winced.

"Going to the torture chamber–" Ka-nanu continued placidly, "I found them about to torture little Delcardes who wept and told all she had to tell but they did not believe her–she is only an inquisitive child, Kull, in spite of her beauty and all. So I brought her here.

"Now, Kull, Delcardes spoke truth when she said Saremes was her guest and that the cat was very ancient. True; she is a cat of the Old Race and wiser than other cats, going and coming as she pleases, but still a cat. Delcardes had spies in the palace to report to her such small things as the secret letter which you hid in your dagger sheath and the surplus in the treasury–the courtier who reported that was one of her spies and had discovered the surplus and told her before royal treasurer knew. Her spies were your most loyal retainers and the things they told her harmed you not and aided her, whom they all love, for they knew she meant no harm.

"Her idea was to have Kuthulos, speaking through the mouth of Saremes, gain your confidence through small prophesies and facts which anyone might know, such as warning you against Thulses Doom. Then, by constant urging you to let Kulra Thoom marry Delcardes, to accomplish what was Delcardes'

only desire."

"Then Kuthulos turned traitor," said Tu.

And at that moment there was a noise at the chamber door and guards entered haling between them a tall, gaunt form, his face masked by a veil, his arms bound.

"Kuthulos!"

"Aye, Kuthulos." said Ka-nanu, but he seemed not at ease and his eyes roved restlessly, "Kuthulos, no doubt, with his veil over his face to hide the workings of his mouth and neck muscles as he talked through Saremes."

Kull eyed the silent figure which stood there like a statue. A silence fell over the group, as if a cold wind had passed over them. There was a tenseness in the atmosphere. Delcardes looked at the silent figure and her eyes widened as the guards told in terse sentances how the slave had been captured while trying to escape from the palace down a little used corridor.

Then silence fell again and more tensely as Kull stepped forward and reached forth a hand to tear the veil from the hidden face. Through the thin fabric Kull felt two eyes burn into his conciousness. None noticed Ka-nanu clench his hands and tense himself as if for a terrific struggle.

Then as Kull's hand almost touched the veil, a sudden sound broke the breathless silence–such a sound as a man might make by striking the floor with his forehead or elbow. The noise seemed to come from a wall and Kull crossing the room with a stride, smote against a panel, from behind which the rapping sounded. A hidden door swung inward, revealing a dusty corridor, upon which lay the bound and gagged form of a man.

The dragged him forth and standing him upright, unbound him.

"Kuthulos!" shrieked Delcardes.

Kull stared. The man's face, now revealed was thin, and kindly like a teacher or philosophy and morals.

"Yes, my lords and lady," he said, "That man who wears my veil stole upon me through the secret door, struck me down and bound me. I lay there, hearing him send the king to what he thought was Kull's death, but could do nothing."

"Then who is he?" All eyes turned toward the veiled figure and stepped forward.

"Lord king, beware!" exclaimed the real Kuthulos, "He–"

Kull tore the veil away with one motion and recoiled with a gasp. Delcardes screamed and her knees gave way; the councillors pressed backward, faces white and the guard released their grasp and shrank horror-struck away.

The face of the man was a bare white skull, in whose eyes sockets flamed

livid fire!

"Thulses Doom!"

"Aye, Thulses Doom, fools!" the voice echoed cavernously and hollowly, "The greatest of all wizards and your eternal foe, Kull of Atlantis. You have won this tilt but, beware, there shall be others."

He burst the bonds on his arms with a single contemptuous gesture and stalked toward the door, the throng giving back before him.

"You are a fool of no discernment, Kull," said he, "else you had never mistaken that other fool, Kuthulos, for me, even with the veil and his garments."

Kull saw that it was so, for though the twain were alike in height and general shape, the flesh of the Skull-faced wizard was like that of a man long dead.

The king stood, not fearful like the others, but so amazed at the turn events had taken that he was speechless. Then even as he sprang forward, like a man waking from a dream, Brule charged with the silent ferocity of a tiger, his curved sword gleaming. And like a gleam of light it flashed into the ribs of Thulses Doom, piercing him through and through so that the point stood out between his shoulders.

Brule regained his blade with a quick wrench as he leaped back, then, crouching strike again were it necessary, he halted. Not a drop of blood oozed from the wound which in a living man had been mortal. The Skull-faced one laughed.

"Ages ago I died as men die!" he taunted, "Nay, I shall pass to some other sphere when my time comes, not before. I bleed not for my veins are empty and I feel only a slight coldness which shall pass when the wound closes, as it is even now closing. Stand back, fool, your master goes but he shall come again to you and you shall scream and shrivel and die in that coming! Kull, I salute you!"

And while Brule hesitated, unnerved, and Kull halted in undecided amazement Thulses Doom stepped through the door and vanished before their very eyes.

"At least, Kull," said Ka-nanu later, "You have won your first tilt with the Skull-faced one, as he admitted. Next time we must be more wary, for he is a fiend incarnate–an owner of magic black and unholy. He hates you for he is a satellite of the great serpent whose power you broke; he has the gift of illusion and of invisibility, which only he posseses. He is grim and terrible."

"I fear him not." said Kull, "The next time I will be prepared and my answer shall be a sword thrust, even though he be unslayable, which thing I doubt. Brule did not find his vitals, which even a living being dead man must

have, that is all."

Then turning to Tu,

"Lord Tu, it would seem that the civilized races also have their tambus, since the blue lake is forbidden to all save myself."

Tu answered testily, angry because Kull had given the happy Delcardes permission to marry whom she desired:

"My lord, that is no heathen tambu such your tribe bows to; it is a matter of state-craft, to preserve peace between Valusia and the lake-beings who are magicians."

"And we keep tambus so as not to offend unseen spirits of tigers and eagles." said Kull, "And therein I see no difference."

"At any rate," said Tu, "You must beware of Thulses Doom; for he vanished into another dimension and as long as he is there he is invisible and harmless to us, but he will come again."

"Ah, Kull," sighed the old rascal, Ka-nanu, "Mine is a hard life compared to yours; Brule and I were drunk in Zarfhaana and I fell down a flight of stairs, most damnably bruising my shins. And all the while you lounged in sinful ease on the silk of the kingship, Kull."

Kull glared at him wordlessly and turned his back, giving his attention to the drowsing Saremes.

"She is not a wizard-beast, Kull," said the Spear-slayer, "She is wise but she merely looks her wisdom and does not speak. Yet her eyes fascinate me with their antiquity. A mere cat, just the same."

"Still, Brule," said Kull, admiringly, stroking her silky fur, "Still, she is a very ancient cat, very."

The King and the Oak
(Draft)

Before the shadows of the night before the dawn lay dead
King Kull rode out of Kolderkon to make a king a bed;
Oh, bitter was the couch he made, doom black and ghastly red.

Before the shadows slew the sun the kites were soaring free
And Kull rode down the forst road, his red sword at his knee;
And winds were whispering ’round the world: “King Kull rides to the sea.”

The sun died crimson in the sea, the long grey shadows fell,
The moon rose like a silver skull that wrought a demon’s spell
For in its light great trees stood up like specters out of Hell.

In spectral light the trees stood up inhuman monsters dim,
Kull thought each trunk a living shape, each branch a knotted limb,
And strange unmortal evil eyes flamed terribly at him.

The branches writhed like knotted snakes, they beat against the night,
And one great oak with swayings stiff stupendous in his sight,
Tore up its roots and blocked his way, grim in the ghostly light.

They grappled in the forest way, the king and grisly oak;

Its great limbs bent him in their grip, but never a word was spoke;
And useless in his iron hand, his stabbing dagger broke.

And all about the frenzied king, there sang a dim refrain
Frought deep with seven million years of evil, hate and pain:
“We were the lords ere man had come, and shall be lords again.”

At dawn the king with bloody hands strove ’gainst a silent tree;
As from a drifting dream he woke; a wind blew down the lea,
And Kull of high Atlantis rode silent to the sea.

Appendices

Atlantean Genesis
by Patrice Louinet

Between 1926 and 1930, Robert E. Howard began thirteen stories featuring Kull, Atlantean king of Valusia, completing ten. However only three of those tales saw print in Howard's lifetime: *The Shadow Kingdom* (Weird Tales, August 1929), *The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune* (Weird Tales, September 1929), and *Kings of the Night* (Weird Tales, November 1930), the last a Bran Mak Morn story co-starring the Atlantean king.

These three stories were particularly well received by Weird Tales editor Farnsworth Wright and by the readers, if the commentaries found in the magazine's letters section (sometimes years after the stories had appeared) are any indication. Howard Phillips Lovecraft held these stories in very high esteem and even suggested in a 1934 letter that Howard write more tales about the character. Howard replied, in his deceptively deprecatory tone: "Thanks for the kind things you said about the Kull stories, but I doubt if I'll ever be able to write another. The three stories I wrote about that character seemed almost to write themselves, without any planning on my part; there was no conscious effort on my part to work them up. They simply grew up,

unsummoned, full grown in my mind and flowed out on paper from my finger tips. To sit down and consciously try to write another story on that order would be to produce something the artificiality of which would be apparent."

Howard's stories, at least all the major ones, required much more work and elaboration than the Texan was willing to concede, and the Kull series was no exception. For instance, Howard worked on the second Kull story for over a year. But when he was telling Lovecraft that he was unable to write a Kull story anymore, Howard was probably telling the truth. He had started to lose his grip on the character by 1929 and had discarded him completely after a series of false starts and unsold stories. In 1932, Howard had recycled one of the last-written Kull stories–*By This Axe I Rule!*–in order to create a new series, centering around a certain grim Cimmerian warrior. The two characters have little in common except their imposing physiques, but the background for the two series is similar: barbarian characters evolving in kingdoms or empires from earth's mythical past, confronted, in one way or another, by decaying civilizations–Kull by his adopted country, Conan by the Hyborian kingdoms. Conan had replaced Kull, and Howard found it impossible to write about a character who no longer represented a vehicle through which he could express his ideas.

What Howard was unaware of, in spite of the unusual critical praise these three stories received over the years, was that he had given birth to a new subgenre of literature, since dubbed "Heroic Fantasy," "Epic Fantasy," or "Sword and Sorcery"–denominations as unsatisfying as they are reductive. The mixing of historical (or pseudo-historical) elements with elements of fantasy was nothing new; on the contrary it harked back to the very beginnings of literature. What Howard brought to the form was to modernize it, getting rid of the chivalrous aspects, flowery language, and stilted personalities, writing violent tales in a realistic style that reflected Howard's environment and that of his readership. Critic George Knight once argued very convincingly, "Because his most popular creations are his fantasy tales, Howard is put into the category of 'fantasy writer,' yet…the most interesting aspect of his fiction is not the fantasy but the realism–a realism springing from Howard's class, environment, beliefs, and the age in which he wrote."

The Kull stories (and this is also true for the Conan series) are thus "realistic fantasy tales." Unlike his predecessors and unlike the immense majority of his successors, Howard set his stories in universes not so much imaginary as they are forgotten: he wrote about our world and his themes are universal ones. Kull's serpent-men-infected Valusia is no more fantastic than Shakespeare's ghost-haunted Elsinore, yet who would think of labeling Hamlet as "Sword and Sorcery"?

In 1932, when he initiated his Conan series, Howard wrote an essay, *The Hyborian Age*, which explains how this particular phase of mankind's past has now been forgotten. In a letter sent with the essay, Howard explained his need for realism in writing fantasy stories: "Nothing in this article is to be considered as an attempt to advance any theory in opposition to accepted history. It is simply a fictional background for a series of fiction-stories. When I began writing the Conan series a few years ago, I prepared this 'history' of his age in order to lend him and his sagas a greater aspect of realness."

Interestingly enough the essay begins with the destruction of what was Kull's universe:

> Known history begins with the waning of the Pre-Cataclysmic civilization, dominated by the kingdoms of Kamelia, Valusia, Verulia, Grondar, Thule, and Commoria. These peoples spoke a similar language, arguing a common origin. […] The barbarians of that age were the Picts, who lived on islands far out on the western ocean; the Atlanteans, who dwelt on a small continent between the Pictish Islands and the main, or Thurian Continent; and the Lemurians, who inhabited a chain of large islands in the eastern hemisphere. […] Then the Cataclysm rocked the world. Atlantis and Lemuria sank, and the Pictish Islands were heaved up to form the mountain peaks of a new continent. Sections of the Thurian Continent vanished under the waves, or sinking, formed great inland lakes and seas. Volcanoes broke forth and terrific earthquakes shook down the shining cities of the empires. Whole nations were blotted out. (*The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian*, Del Rey, 2003, pp. 381–382) [Incidentally, the word "Thurian," describing Kull's continent, was coined in 1932; it never appears in any of the Kull stories.]

By retroactively integrating Kull's world to Conan's (giving a few details as to its geography and history), by showing the destruction of Kull's world and how it was eventually replaced by Conan's, by explaining how the

Atlanteans ultimately became the Cimmerians (hence that Conan could be a descendant of Kull) and, last but not least, by writing the first Conan tale on the ashes of an unsold Kull story, Howard was telling us that he now envisioned the Kull series a prehistoric one, which paved the way for the Conan stories. The Thurian continent belonged to the past of the Hyborian world–and of Howard's career–just as the Hyborian world belongs to our past. Having distanced himself from Kull, Howard had placed himself in a position which prevented him from writing new Kull tales, having obliterated the character and his universe in the meantime.

Considering the Kull series only as an archaic version of Conan is paying them a substantial disservice. Howard's readers and critics were certainly right to disagree with the author in this matter, for the Kull stories are those in which Howard was creating a new genre of fiction as he was writing the stories, playing with a universe that was definitely not as systematized as Conan's, and toying with the various possibilities this new genre could offer. While all the Conan stories were penned with Weird Tales in mind, the Kull stories were submitted to a variety of different magazines; some may read like prototypical Conan stories, some as prose poems, some as philosophical fables. Howard let his imagination run free. It was a time of experimentation: the Kull stories range far and wide and can be very different between one story and the next.

The genesis of the stories of the Atlantean king is also that of the genre Howard was inventing.

In his *A Biographical Sketch of Robert E. Howard*, which originally appeared in 1935, Alvin Earl Perry quoted from a now-lost letter from Howard. In that letter the Texan offered a few comments on the genesis of some of his characters. About Kull, he wrote that he "was put on paper the moment he was created…In fact he first appeared as only a minor character in a story which was never accepted. At least, he was intended to be a minor character, but I had not gone far before he was dominating the yarn."

The only extant story that fits the description is the first tale of this book, previously published under the title *Exile of Atlantis*. This short vignette, in which Kull is but one of three lead characters and is indeed soon "dominating the yarn" is the only Kull story that was written before *The Shadow Kingdom*. It was thus the first Kull story, but at the same time it was also the last to feature one of Howard's earliest creations, Am-ra, whose origins will help us understand the genesis of the Kull stories: Am-ra apparently played the same

role for Kull that the Atlantean would later play for Conan.

Howard said he began buying pulp magazines at fifteen, in the summer of 1921, though he had probably been reading them for some time. His favorite publications seem to have been Adventure and Argosy, the two leading pulp fiction magazines of that era. Before Weird Tales began publication in 1923, there was no magazine devoted solely to weird fiction. The young Howard was a voracious reader of adventure fiction, an inclination that would be true all his life. Argosy and Adventure specialized in historical and adventure tales, and traces of influence of all the major contributors to those magazines–we may cite Harold Lamb, Talbot Mundy, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and Arthur D. Howden-Smith–can be detected in the writings of Howard. It was thus natural that when Howard began writing fiction on a (more or less) professional basis in 1921, just after having discovered these magazines, it was in these authors that he found his first inspiration. The Texan thus wrote a number of tales clearly derived from Mundy, and borrowed from Burroughs or, at a later date, from Lamb and Howden-Smith.

It was Howard scholar and Wandering Star editor Rusty Burke who unearthed the influence Paul L. Anderson had on a young Robert E. Howard. Anderson (1880–1956), now completely forgotten, had several novelettes published in Argosy in the early 1920s, beginning with *The Son of the Red God* in the 31 January 1920 issue. The tale was preceded by a note which explained how he had found a Crô-Magnon parchment in a cave in France and that his story was nothing more than a translation from the original. The subject of the tale is a favorite of the era: how the Crô-Magnons supplanted the Neanderthals. That Howard enjoyed Anderson is attested by his borrowing of several names, found in a series of tales and poems probably dating from 1922 or 1923. Anderson's "En-ro of the Ta-an" and "Land of the Dying Sun" are echoed in Howard's "Am-ra of the Ta-an" and "Land of the Morning Sun," among several other borrowings. Howard's first professionally published story, *Spear and Fang* written in 1924, shows remarkable similarity to Anderson's first tale.

Howard wrote several stories or poems dealing, directly or indirectly, with Am-ra of the Ta-an. In one of these, of which only two pages have come to us, Am-ra has a dispute with a woman named Ah-lala. Both names are echoed in the future Kull stories, with Am-ra appearing in the first Kull story and a Lala-ah appearing in the longest of the unfinished tales. How Am-ra the Crô-Magnon could become Am-ra the Atlantean was explained by Howard himself in a 1928 letter to his friend Harold Preece:

> About Atlantis–I believe something of the sort existed, though I do not especially hold any theory about a high type of civilization existing there–in fact, I doubt that. But some continent was submerged away back, or some large body of land, for practically all peoples have legends about a flood. And the Cro-Magnons appeared suddenly in Europe, developed to a high state of primitive culture; there is no trace to show that they came up the ladder of utter barbarism in Europe. Suddenly their remains are found supplanting the Neanderthal Man, to whom they have no ties of kinship whatever. Where did they originate? Nowhere in the known world, evidently. They must have originated and developed through the different basic stages of evolution in some land which is not now known to us.
>
> The occultists say that we are the fifth–I believe–great sub-race. Two unknown and unnamed races came, then the Lemurians, then the Atlanteans, then we. They say the Atlanteans were highly developed. I doubt it. I think they were simply the ancestors of the Cro-Magnon man, who by some chance, escaped the fate which overtook the rest of the tribes.
>
> All my views on the matter I included in a long letter to the editor to whom I sold a tale entitled "The Shadow Kingdom," which I expect will be published as a foreword to that story–if ever. This tale I wove about a mythical antediluvian empire, a contemporary of Atlantis. (*Selected Letters, 1923–1930*, Necronomicon Press, 1989, p. 20)

Sadly, the letter to the editor has not survived. However, Howard's "views on the matter" may be discerned in a story which had been rejected in March 1926 by Farnsworth Wright, editor of Weird Tales. A lengthy part of *Men of*

the Shadows is devoted to early history and prehistory, and notably to Atlantis, Lemuria and the Crô-Magnons:

> To those islands came the Nameless Tribe [i.e., the Picts]…they were the first Men…Then the Lemurians, the Second Race, came into the northern land…Now the Atlanteans (Crô-Magnons) were the Third Race. They were physical giants, finely made men, who inhabited caves and lived by the chase… then from the North came the Celts, bearing sword and spears of bronze…And they were the Fourth Race. (*Bran Mak Morn: The Last King*, Del Rey, 2005, pp. 23–26)

The "great sub-races" Howard alludes to suggest he was familiar with the ideas of Helena Blavatsky and Theosophy, either having read the books or having heard about these theories from his father or a friend who was interested in occultism. The most important point of the letter (and of the Bran story) however, is the fact that Howard was convinced that there was a linkage between the Crô-Magnons and Atlantis, and that the latter was historical, an empire belonging to Earth's past, not an imaginary one. As early as 1923 Howard had casually mentioned Atlantis as a historical empire, contemporary to Accad, in a letter to his friend Tevis Clyde Smith. The likeliest source for Howard's idea of an Atlantean/Crô-Magnon connection is Lewis Spence, a British folklorist. Spence was convinced of the former existence of the continent of Atlantis and wrote several books in which he "proved" his theory. His *The Problem of Atlantis* (1924) and *Atlantis in America* (1925) may very well have influenced Howard. The identification of Atlantis as the source of Crô-Magnon man and his culture seems to have been original with Spence.

The Kull series was thus born at the time Howard discarded the entirely "historical" setting–i.e., Atlantis–in favor of one mixing the historical and the imaginary. This is why the first Kull story is also the last of the Am-ra the Atlantean tales. Both characters are very similar: Kull is "a counterpart of [Am-ra], except for the fact that he [i]s slightly larger–taller, a thought deeper of chest and broader of shoulder." Kull is basically a character who wants to

flee reality–his reality–in favor of the pursuit of what is presented as a dream in that first story, a country dreamed of, spoken of, but otherwise unknown: Valusia. When Howard dropped Atlantis for Valusia, he dropped Am-ra for Kull. In a nutshell, he stopped writing "historical" tales in favor of fantasy tales.

The name "Valusia" appears to be a Howardian coinage. It appears very early in the young author's career in *Khoda Khan's Tale*, an incomplete story dating from 1922 or 1923. In that tale, protagonist Frank Gordon is trying to locate an ancient African city, supposedly once inhabited by a strange race of white people. Gordon first discovers "a temple erected to the elephant," quickly followed by another, fresher looking one, which he soon discovers to be much more ancient than the other:

> It consisted merely of a stone wall, round in shape, with an opening at one place. It had no roof. In the center there was a great, carved serpent of stone, coiled on a stone pedestal which [was] decorated by carvings of other, smaller serpents. The stone wall was also decorated by snake-carvings. Gordon went over the ruins carefully. He seemed very much interested and slightly puzzled. "The Carthaginians did not mention another race," said he, "yet the race that erected this snake-temple did not erect the elephant-temple we found at the edge of the swamp. They represent two distinct forms of architecture, so distinct that it is scarcely possible that the same race erected both temples." (*The Coming of El Borak*, Cryptic Publications, 1987, pp. 47–48)

As will be the case in *The Shadow Kingdom*, the confrontation is between a white-skinned barbaric race and an older, highly civilized one, closely linked to the Serpent. Earlier in the story, Gordon had indicated that: "The people who inhabited the empire were white, fair-skinned and fair-haired, and the name of the empire was Valooze" (p. 38). Evidently, this "Valooze" was the direct ancestor of Howard's later "Valusia."

As to Kull's name, there is a possibility that the name comes from a poem

Howard had read many years prior in Cosmopolitan. On February 4, 1925, Howard wrote R.W. Gordon, editor of the folk songs department of Adventure magazine: “There is a poem which I have been trying to re-discover. I suppose it is out of your department, as it has been published but if any of the readers should know of it, I should appreciate it very much if they could assist me in obtaining a copy of it. It came out in the Cosmopolitan magazine some nine years ago.” This poem, identified by Rusty Burke as *The Search* by Edgar Lee Masters, appeared in the March 1917 issue; it has several allusions to “Old King Cole.” Perhaps even more interesting are the few lines which Howard remembered eight years later as:

> By heaven’s breeze unfurled
> The lion banner and the dragon banner
> Flutter around the world.

and which read in fact:

> By heaven’s breeze unfurled
> The Tiger banner and Dragon banner
> Flutter around the world.

Howard’s memory was an exceptional one, and only one word didn’t match. Readers familiar with Howard’s writings will recognize the tiger as Kull’s totem while Conan is often associated with the lion: in the novel *The Hour of the Dragon*, the lion banner is the emblem of Aquilonia, while the dragon banner is that of its enemy, Nemedia, in a clear homage to Masters.

> The last glints of the sun shone on the golden banner of Nemedia with the scarlet dragon, unfurled in the breeze above the pavilion of King Tarascus on an eminence near the eastern cliffs. But the shadow of the western cliffs fell like a vast purple pall across the tents and the army of Aquilonia, and upon the black banner with its golden lion that floated above King Conan's pavilion. (*The Bloody Crown of Conan*, Del Rey, 2004, pp. 92–93)

It is of course impossible to ascertain the influence of Masters' poem on the naming of Howard's character, but it is a tempting possibility. Another will be detailed below.

It is not conclusively known when–or even if–that first Kull story was ever submitted professionally. The original typescript is a peculiar one, written either between July 1925 and January 1926, or between August and September 1926 (that is to say just before Howard began work on what was to become *The Shadow Kingdom*.) The various typographical errors and amateurish corrections would seem in favor of the anterior date, but the fact that the story exists as an original and a carbon would tend to indicate the latter. Early in his career, Howard rarely prepared carbons for his stories, but this probably changed in January 1926 when Weird Tales thought they had lost the typescript for a story which had been accepted for publication. Howard had been unable to provide them with the carbon the editors asked for, not having prepared one. On the other hand, neither the original nor the carbon are titled or signed, usually a sure sign that the typescript was not submitted. The only solutions that present themselves, then, are that Howard thought the story unsuitable for submission and never attempted to title or submit it professionally, preferring to start work on *The Shadow Kingdom*, or that this story was originally the beginning of *The Shadow Kingdom*, whose convoluted history is detailed below.

The Shadow Kingdom occupies a special place in Howard's fiction in particular and weird fiction in general, as well as in the author's heart. In the letter to Alvin Earl Perry, he stated that he "enjoyed writing 'The Shadow Kingdom' better than any other tale." Just after selling the story, Howard

confided to Tevis Clyde Smith:

> I enjoyed writing it more than any piece of prose I ever wrote. The subject of psychology is the one I am mainly interested in these days. The story I sold before this was purely a study in psychology of dreams and this mss. deals largely in primitive psychology. (REH to Tevis Clyde Smith, ca. October 1927, *Selected Letters, 1923–1930,* p. 9)

Evidence to be found in Howard's semi-autobiographical novel *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs* enables us to trace the first attempts to complete what would become *The Shadow Kingdom* to 1926. In that novel, Howard's alter-ego, Steve Costigan "did begin a wild fantasy entitled 'The Phantom Empire' (i.e., *The Shadow Kingdom*)," which he "laid aside partly finished and forgot about" (*Post Oak and Sand Roughs*, D. Grant, 1989, p. 109). Almost a year later, in the summer of 1927, "he came upon 'The Phantom Empire,' deserted several months before, completed it, and then laid it aside and forgot about it." Some time later, "Steve again discovered 'The Phantom Empire,' rewrote it, and again laid it aside." The story was accepted a short while later by Farnsworth Wright and published in the August 1929 issue of Weird Tales.

A series of letters to H. P. Lovecraft illuminates the source for many of the events depicted in the story. In June 1931, Howard briefly summed up his interests in the Bible to Lovecraft:

> As for Biblical history, my real interest begins and ends with the age of Saul, outside of snatches here and there, as in the case of Samson. I'm sure you're right in your theory that numbers of Aryans must have drifted into the near East of that age, and as far as I can see, the days of Saul and David represent an Aryan phase in the racial-life of Israel. (REH to H. P. Lovecraft, ca. June 1931, unpublished)

He had expressed much the same sentiment in an earlier letter:

> I cannot think of Saul, David, Abner and Joab as Jews, not even as Arabs; to me they must always seem like Aryans, like myself. Saul, in particular, I always unconsciously visualize as a Saxon king, of those times when the invaders of Britain were just beginning to adopt the Christian religion. (REH to HPL, ca. February 1931, unpublished)

This seems to have been an important issue with Howard. Tevis Clyde Smith, in the notes for his projected Howard biography, wrote:

> Hated Disliked Samuel and Respected Saul–("So Far the Poet…," *Report on a Writing Man & Other Reminiscences of Robert E. Howard,* Necronomicon Press, 1991, p. 36)

Howard even wrote a poem, "Dreaming in Israel," on the subject.

In the February letter to Lovecraft, Howard went on to elaborate on his admiration for King Saul:

> I have always felt a deep interest in Israel in connection with Saul. Poor devil! A pitiful and heroic figure, set up as a figure-

> head because of his weight and the spread of his shoulders, and evincing an expected desire of being king in more than name–a plain, straight-forward man, unversed in guile and subtlety, flanked and harassed by scheming priests, beleaguered by savage and powerful enemies, handicapped by a people too wary and backward in war–what wonder that he went mad toward the end? He was not fitted to cope with the mysteries of king-craft, and he had too much proud independence to dance a puppet on the string of the high-priest–there he sealed his own doom. When he thwarted the snaky Samuel, he should have followed it up by cutting that crafty gentleman's throat–but he dared not. The hounds of Life snapped ever at Saul's heels; a streak of softness made him human but made him less a king… Samuel had him in a strangle-hold; not only did the high-priest have the people behind him, but he played on Saul's own fears and superstitions and in the end, ruined him and drove him to madness, defeat and death. The king found himself faced by opposition he could not beat down with his own great sword–foes that he could not grasp with his hands. Life became a grappling with shadows, a plunging at blind, invisible bars. He saw the hissing head of the serpent beneath each mask of courtier, priest, concubine and general. They squirmed, venom-ladened beneath his feet, plotting his downfall; and he towered above them, yet must perforce bend an ear close to the dust, striving to translate their hisses. But for Samuel, vindictive, selfish and blindly shrewd as most priests are, Saul had risen to his full stature–as it was, he was a giant chained…To one man Saul could always turn–Abner, a soldier and a gentleman in the fullest sense of the word–too honorable, too idealistic for his own good. Saul and Abner were worth all that cringing treacherous race to which they belonged by some whim of chance.

Most of these sentences echo the general tone and plot of *The Shadow Kingdom*, where the snake metaphor has given way to actual snake-like characters. They also echo some of Kull's musings: "As he sat upon his throne in the Hall of Society and gazed upon the courtiers, the ladies, the

lords, the statesmen, he seemed to see their faces as things of illusion, things unreal, existent only as shadows and mockeries of substance. Always he had seen their faces as masks, but before he had looked on them with contemptuous tolerance, thinking to see beneath the masks shallow, puny souls, avaricious, lustful, deceitful, a vague horror that lurked beneath the smooth masks. While he exchanged courtesies with some nobleman or councilor he seemed to see the smiling face fade like smoke and the frightful jaws of a serpent gaping there" (p. 41). The "one man" to whom Saul can always turn evokes of course Brule, the spear-slayer. The only notable difference between the two "stories" resides in the absence of an equivalent to the "snaky Samuel"; in Howard's story, the snake-characters are indistinguishable from one another.

Upon learning of the acceptance of *The Shadow Kingdom* in September 1927, Howard reacted in a typical fashion and almost immediately proceeded to write another story starring the same character. (Howard had completed *Wolfshead* in July 1925, the same month the first story starring de Montour, *In the Forest of Villefère*, was published. A few months later, he would repeat this, completing the second Solomon Kane story, *Skulls in the Stars*, upon news of the sale of the first, *Red Shadows*.) This time the writing took much less time than for the first story: Howard wrote an eight-page draft, polished it by rewriting the last two pages of the story and sent the result to Weird Tales. That second Kull story, *The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune*, was quickly accepted by Farnsworth Wright for $20. Of that story, generally held in high esteem by contemporary as well as modern readers, Howard offered the following comment to his friend Clyde Smith: "more of the Shadow Kingdom, occult and mystical, vague and badly written; this is the deepest story I ever tried to write and I got out of my depth."

It was some weeks before Howard would return to writing Kull stories. In the first months of 1928, he began what could have been a serial-length Kull story, but abandoned it at the eighteenth page (see p. 65). Howard probably realized that his story was rambling and unconvincing, relegated it to his archives, and immediately began work on another Kull story, which was to be titled *Delcardes' Cat*. The history of the composition of this tale is worth detailing: Howard wrote it in two sessions. He titled his first draft *Delcardes' Cat*, and only had the idea for the character that was to become Thulsa Doom as he was writing page 22 of a draft that runs 25 pages. The introduction of the new character (whose name was initially Thulses Doom) required a few modifications in the earlier parts of the tale, which of course lacked any references to Thulsa–or Thulses–Doom. Howard, in a particularly unprofessional move, didn't even rewrite his story, making all his changes on

his first draft, and retitled the tale *The Cat and the Skull*, whose "Skull" is an explicit reference to Thulsa Doom. The story survives as an original (with the modifications) and a carbon (which shows the first stage of the story).

The story is rather poor and suffers from a lack of cohesiveness, which is not surprising given the late addition of Thulsa Doom. The character of Kuthulos is introduced as a "slave," but later on Tu, the chancellor, suddenly "remembers" that Kuthulos is "a slave, aye, but the greatest scholar and the wisest man in all the Seven Empires." In fact, it is quite probable that Howard first intended Kuthulos to be the villain of the story, only discarding the idea when he came up with Thulsa Doom. Last, it took Howard several pages before he gave a name to the slave; and it appears, upon close scrutiny of the typescript, that his original name was not Kuthulos, but Kathulos. Not surprisingly, the story was rejected by Weird Tales, apparently to Howard's surprise, if this is indeed the unnamed story he is alluding to in *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs* (p. 133). Undaunted, Howard wrote yet another tale featuring Kull, the second and last featuring Kuthulos: *The Screaming Skull of Silence*. The story was quickly submitted to Weird Tales and likewise rejected.

After a false start and two unsold tales, it would be several months before Howard would return to writing Kull stories. In the meantime, he met with commercial success in the acceptance of his longest story to date. *Skullface* (Howard's original form of the title) was written during the second half of 1928, and was accepted for $300 later in the year. It would be hard not to notice that in this story, Stephen Costigan and John Gordon are opposed to the deadly "Kathulos of Atlantis," whose physical description matched that of Thulsa Doom. Kathulos/Kuthulos had disappeared from the Kull stories only to re-enter Howard's fiction via another story.

As 1928 was drawing to a close, Howard once again returned to Kull. *The Striking of the Gong* was the first Kull story not submitted to Weird Tales, but was sent instead to Argosy; *The Altar and the Scorpion*, a short story in which Kull is only mentioned, was submitted to Weird Tales. Both stories failed to sell. *The Curse of the Golden Skull*, also barely mentioning Kull, and probably composed in late 1928 or early 1929, likewise met rejection.

The metaphysical tone of the early Kull stories echoed Howard's philosophical delvings of the time. In January 1928, Howard was writing Clyde Smith: "The subject of psychology is the one I am mainly interested in these days." The questions of reality and identity are central to those stories which, due to their short length, writing style, and atmosphere, tend more toward the philosophical fable than the kind of fantasy stories Farnsworth Wright would have bought.

This passage from a letter to Clyde Smith, for example, resonates with

passages in *The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune* and *The Striking of the Gong*:

> Life is Power, Life is Electricity. You and I are atoms of power, cogs in the wheels of the Universal system. Life is not predestined, that is, the trivial affairs of our lives are not, but we have certain paths to follow and we cannot escape them…we are sparks of stardust, atoms of unknown power, powerless in ourselves but making up the whole of some great power that uses us as ruthlessly as fire uses fuel. We are parts of an entity, futile in ourselves. We are merely phases of electricity; electrons endlessly vibrating between the magnetic poles of birth and death. We cannot escape these trails in which our paths lie. We do not, as individual entities, really exist, we do not live. There is no life, there is no existence; there is simply vibration. What is a life but an uncompleted gesture, beginning in oblivion and ending in oblivion?…There is no beginning, nor will there ever be an end to the thing. (REH to Tevis Clyde Smith, ca. February 1928)

As a matter of fact, all of Howard's letters to Tevis Clyde Smith from early 1928 contain lengthy passages on philosophy, religion, psychology and similar interests. Howard was undergoing a period of profound introspection, that very naturally found its way into his fiction. Common to all the themes alluded to in the letters is the central motif of identity, the relation of the self to the universe.

At any rate, in the fourteen months that had followed the sale of *The Shadow Kingdom* and *The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune*, Howard had begun or completed six Kull stories, hadn't succeeded in selling any of them, and none had yet appeared in print.

Between late 1928 and mid-1929, Howard would not complete another Kull story. That he had not decided to cease his efforts in spite of these failures is attested by the two aborted stories he attempted to complete in the first months of the year.

There is little to be said about *The Black City*, a three page fragment that

takes Brule and Kull away from Valusia to the city of Kamula. The other, untitled fragment, however, is particularly interesting. In April 1929, an overjoyed Howard wrote Tevis Clyde Smith:

> On my return here I found a returned ms. from Adventure, with a line or two from the assistant editor, telling me to submit some more of my work, and soon after returning I got a letter from Argosy, accepting that story that I told you about…The day after getting that letter I got a check from them for $100. Also a letter from Weird Tales with the advance sheets of a story appearing in the next issue. Farnsworth said he intended publishing a sonnet in the next issue after that and then "The Shadow Kingdom" which is a $100 story, and after that a shorter story [*The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune*]. I believe he's paving the way to publish the serial I sold him, but of course I may be wrong.

As the acceptance of *The Shadow Kingdom* seems to have occasioned the writing of *The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune*, it was probably the news of the forthcoming appearance of the two Kull stories that prompted Howard to return once more to the character, but abandoning the more metaphysical aspects in favor of straight-adventure stories set in a Fantasy background.

His first attempt didn't go beyond the third page. This untitled draft (see p. 151) is the first Kull story to display Howard's growing passion for things Celtic, which had become conscious in December 1928. Why Howard did not complete the story is easily understood: not only does the story make mention of the historical Celts (in a story supposedly set thousands of years B.C.), but he also gives blue eyes to the fragment's protagonist, Brule. Brule had always been mentioned as having dark eyes in previous stories, and logically so since he was a Pictish warrior. Blue eyes were in fact becoming the staple of Howard's Celtic or pseudo-Celtic heroes, Conan being the most famous, of course. More than a casual mistake, this was a clue as to what was happening to the series: Howard was growing detached from his Atlantean creation, and more and more interested in Brule. In that fragment, Brule explains the mode

of government of his tribe, the Borni:

> We all acknowledge Nial of the Tatheli as over-king but his rule is loose. He does not interefere were our affairs among ourselves, nor does he levy tribute or taxes, as the Valusians call it, from any except the Nargi and the Dano and the Whale-slayers who live on the isle of Tathel with his own tribe… Neither does he interfere when two tribes go to war–unless some tribe enroaches on the three who pay tribute. When the war is fought and won, he arbitrates the matter, and his judgment is final…And when the Lemurians or the Celts or any foreign nation or band of reavers come against us, he sends forth for all tribes to put aside their quarrels and fight side by side. Which is a good thing. He might be a supreme tyrant if he liked, for his own tribes is very strong, and with the aid of Valusia he might do as he liked–but he knows that though he might, with his tribes and their allies, crush all the other tribes, there would never be peace again, but revolt as long as a Borni or a Sungara or a Wolf-slayer or any of the tribesmen was left alive.

The fragment stops at this point, and it is very interesting to compare it to what happens in the next–and last–Kull stories.

By This Axe I Rule! and *Swords of the Purple Kingdom* were completed in rapid succession, probably in May and June 1929. In many ways, both stories mark a return to the roots of the Kull series. In *Exile of Atlantis* were mentioned the characters of Ascalante and Ala; these are also the names of characters, albeit different ones, in the 1929 story. More important, the plots of the 1929 tales revolve around an attempted coup d'état, as did *The Shadow Kingdom*. But if *The Shadow Kingdom* had its origins in Howard's reading of the Biblical story of Saul, *By This Axe I Rule!* was inspired by his reading of a classic playwright.

In the early months of 1929, Howard had probably been rereading Shakespeare. In March, he included two erotic playlets in a letter to Smith. Of

the first, Howard wrote that his “desires wavered between a wish to write straight jovial obscenity and a desire to simply parody Shakespeare and exaggerate and emphasize what I consider show the bastardness of the scut’s nature.” Not surprisingly, Tevis Clyde Smith later indicated that Shakespeare was Howard’s favorite playwright.

By This Axe I Rule! opens with a scene in which conspirators decide to do away with the king on that same day. The scene takes place late at night, as dawn is nearing. To seal their alliance, all men take an oath.

Act II, scene 1 of William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* takes place in Brutus’ orchard. It is night, and dawn is nearing. As the conspirators agree to assassinate Caesar on that same day, Brutus asks them to join their hands and Cassius subsequently proposes an oath, which Brutus refuses. Despite the small difference, this scene is highly reminiscent of its equivalent in *By This Axe I Rule!*

After the oath has been sworn, the conspirators of the Kull story depart; Ascalante tells them: “Get back to your places and not by word, deed or look do you betray what is in your minds.” In *Julius Caesar*, Brutus declares: “Good gentlemen, look fresh and merrily;/Let not our looks put on our purposes”…

And if Howard had found in Shakespeare the basic plot of his story, it could be that Howard himself was also indeed trying to “kill” his king, i.e., to put an end to the character and the series. The character now little resembled what he was in the early stories, having become an autocratic ruler. If, in *The Shadow Kingdom*, the menace of the serpent-men was an abhorrent one, in the later story there is little difference between Kull and Ascalante, the leader of the conspirators. What the exile Ascalante wishes to do is exactly the same thing Kull did when he ascended the throne: kill the present and legitimate king. Their method is exactly the same, as shown in this passage from *The Shadow Kingdom*, which describes Kull’s ascent to the throne, but which applies perfectly to Ascalante and what he is doing in *By This Axe I Rule!*: “a bold snatching of opportunity, the swift whirl of swords, the slaying of a tyrant of whom men had wearied unto death, short, crafty plotting with ambitious statesmen out of favor at court–and Kull, wandering adventurer, Atlantean exile, had swept up to the dizzy heights of his dreams: he was lord of Valusia, king of kings.” (pp. 18–19). Ascalante and Kull have much more in common than one may presume at first glance. Further, Brule, who was always on hand to save Kull’s life in time of danger, is noteworthily absent from the tale, leaving Valusia as the story opens. His departing words are quite disquieting: “We are barbarians, together, even if we have spent most of our lives in this land. I go, now. You have naught to fear save an attempt at

assassination, which is no fear at all, considering the fact that you are guarded night and day by a squad of the Red Slayers." Strange words from a man who saved Kull's life numerous times, and especially in *The Shadow Kingdom*, in which Kull was nearly slaughtered in his room by conspirators while he thought he was guarded by the Red Slayers. It is also in *By This Axe I Rule!* that we at last learn the name of the tyrant Kull killed to win the throne: Borna. The name's resemblance to Brule's tribe, the Borni, is striking.

It thus very much seems that Howard was losing contact with his creation and, as he would put it in an oft-quoted passage from a letter to Clark Ashton Smith:

> suddenly I would find myself out of contact with the conception, as if the man himself had been standing at my shoulder directing my efforts, and had suddenly turned and gone away, leaving me to search for another character. (REH to Clark Ashton Smith, 14 December 1933, *Selected Letters, 1931–1936*, p. 59)

By This Axe I Rule! was rejected by Argosy and Adventure, while it is not known where or if *Swords of the Purple Kingdom* was submitted. *The Shadow Kingdom* appeared in the August 1929 issue of Weird Tales, followed the next month by *The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune*. This time, Howard was no longer sufficiently interested in the character to attempt to write new stories.

In February 1930, Kull made a brief come-back in *Kings of the Night*. It is not uninteresting to note that the protagonist of this story is Bran Mak Morn, the Pictish king, whom we learn to be a direct descendant of Brule, no longer the simple warrior of *The Shadow Kingdom*, but described as "the greatest of all the Pictish war-chiefs"; Kull had now become only a secondary character, a king without a kingdom in that story.

Kull and Valusia would linger in Howard's mind until, in March 1932, the character was changed into a Cimmerian and given blue eyes instead of grey– the eyes of Am-ra the Atlantean and of Brule in the Celtic fragment. As to Valusia, its destruction was carried out in the essay *The Hyborian Age* in April of that year.

Conan and the Hyborian Age were coming.

NOTES ON THE ORIGINAL HOWARD TEXTS

The texts for this book were prepared by Patrice Louinet, Rusty Burke, and Dave Gentzel, with assistance from Glenn Lord. The stories have been checked against Howard's original typescripts, copies of which were furnished by Glenn Lord, or the first published appearance if a typescript was unavailable. Drafts of Howard's stories, when extant, have also been checked to ensure the greatest accuracy. Every effort has been made to present the work of Robert E. Howard as faithfully as possible. Deviations from the original sources are detailed in these textual notes. In the following, page, line, and word number are given as follows: 77.1.13, indicating page 77, first line, thirteenth word. Story titles, chapter numbers and titles, and breaks before and after chapter headings, titles, and illustrations are not counted. The page/line number will be followed by the reading in the original source, or a statement indicating the type of change made.

This edition of the Kull stories is based on the best sources available to us; unfortunately, the definitive versions of most of the Kull stories not published during Howard's lifetime are now probably lost. In 1936, Howard's father sent the bulk of his son's typescripts to agent Otis Adelbert Kline. Kline kept the stories he thought had sales potential–among them most of the Kull stories–and resent the rest to Howard's father. The whereabouts of most of the typescripts that stayed with Kline are unknown, and they are presumed lost. Fortunately, several drafts and/or carbons for these tales were among the lot sent back to Dr. Howard and were eventually acquired by Glenn Lord. This collection is thus based on the best–and sadly only–available texts, and will remain the definitive one unless the lost typescripts are miraculously recovered.

Untitled Story (previously published as "Exile of Atlantis") Text taken from Howard's typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. 3.3.8: fragance; 3.5.13: no comma after "man"; 3.6.12: conoiseur; 3.7.1: already; 3.8.11: no comma after "tall"; 3.8.12: no hyphen at "slim waisted"; 3.8.12: no comma after "slim-waisted"; 3.9.1: broad shoulder; 3.11.8: "a" not in original; 3.11.13: accept; 3.13.10: that; 3.17.4: period instead of comma after "fighting"; 3.20.11: comma instead of period after "man"; 3.27.5: comma instead of period after "moon"; 3.29.3: comma instead of period after "Kull"; 3.31.9: "a"

capitalized; 3.34.1: no period after “moon”; 3.35.2: dont; 3.35.7: comma instead of period after “bluntly”; 4.8.2: long; 4.10.2: dont; 4.10.6: comma instead of period after “Kull”; 4.12.2: som; 4.17.1: comma instead of period after “anger”; 4.23.2: comma instead of period after “shame”; 4.26.3: semicolon instead of comma after “not”; 4.26.6: comma instead of period after “Gor-na”; 4.35.8: “but” capitalized; 4.38.8: “the” before man; 4.39.5: angerly; comma instead of period after “angerly/angrily”; 4.40.1: no period after “creation”; 5.1.7: comma instead of period after “subject”; 5.11.2: comma instead of period after “Gor-na”; 5.13.3: chai chains (“chai” typed to right edge of paper); 5.28.1: comma instead of period after “east”; 5.36.8: “and” capitalized; 5.39.1: “or” capitalized; 6.5.3: no comma after “sacked”; 6.9.6: “that” capitalized; 6.12.10: ruslte; 6.13.7: “since” capitalized; 6.20.7: Sevn; 6.23.1: comma instead of period after “satisfaction”; 6.24.7: preared; 7.12.1: no comma after “boldly”; 7.14.4: “hawk like” (no hyphen); 7.15.2: no comma after “face”; 7.16.1: disspassionate; 7.39.5: comma instead of period after “sharply”; 7.39.8: some-one; 7.40.2: there on; 8.8.5: abouthard eyed; 8.1.4: comma instead of period after “lines”; 8.8.2: “my” capitalized; 8.15.3: couldont; 8.17.5: no comma after “blood”; 8.25.1: What’s; 8.25.2: KUll’s; 8.28.2: girl’s; 8.31.3: KUll’s; 9.1.3: cruse; 9.4.2: boud; 9.5.7: typicaly; 9.7.7: eached; 9.9.5: lanced; 9.11.4: semi-colon instead of comma after “nodded”; 9.17.3: spell bound (no hyphen); 9.18.1: nd; 9.19.4: eople; 9.32.1: Butno; 9.34.2: footit.

The Shadow Kingdom
Text taken from Weird Tales, August 1929. 27.1.4: hall; 50.13.1: wounded.

The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune
Text taken from Weird Tales, September 1929. No changes have been made for this edition.

Untitled Draft

Text taken from Howard's typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. Howard changed the name of one character from "Fenar" to "Felgar" beginning on page 5 of the typescript and continuously thereafter. We have thus changed the earlier instances for consistency. 67.2.8: Fenar; 67.10.1: step's; 67.17.1: rhinocerous; 67.18.7: period instead of question mark after "tale"; 67.19.5: period instead of comma after "Kull"; 67.21.7: comma instead of period after "besides"; 67.23.10: consumated; 67.31.3: period instead of comma after "Valka"; 67.31.5: comma instead of period after "Kull"; 67.34.3: thus; 67.34.5: comma instead of period after "soothingly"; 67.36.3: net work; 67.37.12: no period and quotation mark after "blood"; "blood" followed by "in"; a page apparently missing from typescript at this point; 68.1.11: period instead of comma after "girl"; 68.2.1: period instead of comma after "Aye"; 68.2.5: comma instead of period after "spoke"; 68.2.14: Fenar; 68.4.8: Fenar; no quotation mark; 68.8.13: no single quote after "horses"; 68.17.10: Fenar's; 68.19.6: reek; 68.20.3: comma instead of period after "Kull"; 68.23.10: comma instead of period after "door"; 68.25.4: kings; 68.25.9: preceeding; 69.2.4: Fenar's; 69.2.5: period instead of comma after "trail"; 69.2.9: comma instead of period after "ferociously"; 69.5.4: comma instead of period after "Tu"; 69.7.9: comma instead of period after "named"; 69.8.10: period instead of comma after "cities"; 69.21.1: Fenar; 69.25.2: no comma after "allies"; 69.29.2: period instead of exclamation point after "attention"; 69.29.6: comma instead of period after "command"; 69.31.2: curiosly; 69.33.11: caparisioned; 70.8.11: restrain; 70.9.5: comma after "world"; 70.19.11: "were" repeated; 70.23.7: many a drifting; 70.25.5: by gone; 70.28.1: brooding; 70.28.3: clinched; 70.38.5: period instead of comma after "sunrise"; 70.39.1: period instead of comma after "response"; 70.40.1: no quotation mark after "sunrise"; 71.15.4: "him" not in typescript; 71.27.4: that; 71.33.11: debauched; 71.37.13: no comma after "men"; 71.40.1: scruf; 72.3.3: period instead of comma after "steal"; 72.6.2: days (no apostrophe); 72.9.5: period instead of comma after "Valusia"; 72.10.2: apruptly; comma instead of period after "apruptly"; 72.17.2: on; 72.17.6: comma instead of colon after "other"; 72.20.1: period instead of comma after "Aye"; 72.20.4: comma instead of period after "replied"; 72.35.9: period instead of comma after "days"; 72.35.12: And; 72.38.5: period instead of comma after "fellows"; 72.39.4: comma instead of period after "lips"; 75.1.3: period instead of comma after "ways"; 75.2.9: comma instead of period after "contempt"; 75.10.4: comma instead of period after "heed"; 75.13.4: period instead of comma after "barbarian"; 75.18.4: period instead of comma after "position"; 75.19.5: comma instead of period after "end"; 75.19.6: no comma after "North"; 76.3.5: period instead of comma after "Kelkor"; 76.3.7: comma instead of

period after “Kull”; 76.4.7: comma after “name”; 76.7.3: comma after “eastern-most”; 76.10.6: period instead of comma after “Kull”; 76.11.6: comma instead of period after “saddle”; 76.12.6: period instead of comma after “any”; 76.12.8: comma instead of period after “Kull”; 76.14.13: no comma after “land”; 76.15.7: rider’s; 76.16.13: no comma after “hard”; 76.19.11: else desires; 76.25.4: comma after “north”; 76.31.11: no comma after “safe”; 76.38.10: comma instead of period after “gate-guards”; 76.40.4: period instead of comma after “say”; 76.40.7: comma instead of period after “answered”; 77.2.2: period instead of comma after “then”; 77.3.1: comma instead of period after “arm”; 77.5.7: comma instead of period after “covetously”; 77.18.3: comma instead of period after “soldier”; 77.22.1: comma instead of period after “tactics”; 77.27.5: “is” not in typescript; 77.31.7: but; 77.35.9: concience; 77.39.8: statue; 78.14.2: committing of; 78.20.4: consumating; 78.25.3: no hyphen in “class like”; 78.32.1: Kull; 78.35.5: period instead of comma after “hear”; 78.36.8: comma instead of period after “mirth”; 79.1.5: comma instead of period after “woman”; 79.3.7: period instead of comma after “gold”; 79.8.8: comma instead of period after “Kull”; 79.11.1: has there; 79.13.7: comma instead of period after “hand”; 79.14.1: period instead of comma after “king”; 79.17.4: period instead of comma after “king”; 79.23.10: comma instead of period after “suspiciously”; 79.34.5: You; 79.37.1: comma instead of period after “response”; 80.15.4: unconcious; 81.4.4: The; 81.8.3: comma instead of period after “Kull”; 81.17.7: Farsuns; 82.3.4: comma after “pass”; 82.6.7: enlessly; 82.7.10: on; 82.15.5: period instead of comma after “sunrise”; 82.19.7: comma instead of period after “Kull”; 82.19.10: “the” not in typescript; 82.22.2: no quotation mark after “Zarfhaana”; 82.25.4: trails; 82.25.5: lead; 82.27.8: horses (no apostrophe); 82.39.6: no comma after “marked”; 83.2.4: comma after “included”; 83.2.11: spoked; 83.6.1: horseman; 83.7.7: They; 83.11.6: disobeidient; 83.13.3: comma instead of period after “sneered”; 83.15.8: My; 83.16.8: too; 83.20.9: no comma after “unable”; 83.21.3: comma after “stand”; $$$$$83.21.6: comma after “open”; 83.35.11: lead; 83.40.12: horrizin; 84.9.4: Would; 84.11.11: period instead of comma after “dawn”; 84.12.5: comma instead of period after “Kull”; 84.14.4: period instead of comma after “beyond”; 84.14.8: comma instead of period after “man”; 84.14.10: rivers; 84.14.11: mark; 84.16.3: comma instead of period after “Kull”; 84.15.4: period instead of comma after “aged”; 84.35.3: no comma after “battle”; 84.37.1: no comma after “this”; 84.37.7: return; 86.2.4: period instead of comma after “cease”; 86.2.6: comma instead of period after “he”; 86.7.5: period instead of comma after “king”; 86.7.14: acquiesing; 86.9.9: period instead of comma after “forward”; 86.4.3: period instead of comma

after “Kull”; 86.12.14: sentance; 86.13.2: sentance; 86.17.11: unweildy; 86.20.2: comma instead of period after “spake”; 86.25.5: period instead of comma after “river”; 86.24.8: comma instead of period after “ferryman”; 86.26.1: period instead of comma after “Forward”; 86.26.3: comma instead of period after “Kull”

The Cat and the Skull

Text taken from Howard’s typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. Some questionable readings were checked against Howard’s carbon (see below, “Delcardes’ Cat”) and a transcript prepared by Lord. 89.2.7: a may; 89.17.8: no comma after “usually”; 90.1.3: period instead of comma after “speak”; 90.11.6: period instead of comma after “otherwise”; 90.14.7: “if” capitalized; 90.18.2: geniology; 90.18.7: interupted; 90.29.10: period instead of comma after “old”; 90.29.12: comma instead of period after “Delcardes”; 90.32.1: no opening quote before “How”; 90.32.9: Kully; 90.33.7: period instead of comma after “old”; 90.34.2: timbered; 90.36.5: comma instead of period after “swore”; 90.39.10: comma instead of period after “said”; 91.6.1: paragraph does not begin new line in transcript; 91.8.4: neophites; 91.19.6: “where” capitalized; 91.24.3: period instead of comma after “it”; 91.28.5: comma instead of period after “swore”; 91.30.9: dissapproving; 91.32.5: guilessly; 92.1.11: “you” capitalized; 92.4.6: “the” capitalized; 92.5.4: period instead of comma after “trickery”; 92.5.7: comma instead of period after “maintained”; 92.8.9: comma instead of period after “belief”; 92.16.10: period instead of comma after “defense”; 92.16.13: irrevelently; 92.20.5: “a” capitalized; 92.21.2: period instead of comma after “true”; 92.21.5: “and” capitalized; 92.22.8: comma instead of period after “calmly”; 92.23.1: no opening quote before “Lord”; 92.23.2: Chanceller; 92.25.3: comma instead of period after “snarled”; 92.26.9: period instead of comma after “not”; 92.27.7: comma instead of period after “saying”; 92.27.11: no comma after “Tu”; 93.3.6: comma instead of period after “sourly”; 93.5.4: “this” capitalized; 93.6.6: “no” capitalized; 93.9.10: period instead of comma after “palace”; 93.10.5: “the” capitalized; 93.12.8: period instead of comma after “Valusia”; 93.12.14: “and” capitalized; 94.4.9: equallity; 94.15.1: no comma after “For”; 94.22.7: period instead of comma after “told”; 94.23.3: comma instead of period after “doubt”; 94.26.5: “all” capitalized; 94.29.7: comma instead of period after “Saremes”; 94.32.7: deviding; 94.34.7: “why” capitalized; 94.36.12: period instead of comma after “I”; 94.37.2: “lest” capitalized; 94.40.1: cross roads;

95.17.3: phillosophizing; 96.6.13: curtesy; 96.12.4: “the” capitalized; 97.1.5: period instead of comma after “alone”; 97.1.8: “and” capitalized; 97.5.4: grat; 99.7.9: no comma after “spider”; 99.36.8: comma after “horn”; 100.15.7: disembowlled; 100.16.8: comma after “hand”; 100.27.3: concious; 100.29.4: no comma after “horn”; 103.6.10: conciousness; 103.18.7: where-ever; 103.23.11: no comma after “Kull”; 103.27.2: dazzingly; 103.29.2: comma instead of dash after “shore”; 104.3.9: no comma after “which”; 104.3.11: no comma after “also”; 104.28.6: “bloody” capitalized; 104.31.6: comma instead of period after “king”; 104.33.9: period instead of comma after “race”; 104.34.1: comma instead of period after “sombrely”; 106.12.2: period instead of comma after “lie”; 106.12.5: comma instead of period after “answered”; 106.33.1: period instead of comma after “strong”; 106.33.4: comma instead of period after “lake-king”; 107.1.7: period instead of comma after “ghosts”; 107.3.6: period instead of comma after “doom”; 107.3.13: “for” capitalized; 107.5.3: period instead of comma after “now”; 107.5.12: “for” capitalized; 107.16.2: period instead of comma after “consider”; 107.16.4: comma instead of period after “repeated”; 107.24.11: forgetfullness; period instead of comma after “forgetfulness”; 107.37.6: period instead of comma after “devils”; 107.37.9: comma instead of period after “in”; 107.39.3: period instead of comma after “it”; 108.3.5: “give” capitalized; 108.14.3: period instead of comma after “bold”; 108.14.6: comma instead of period after “lake-king”; 108.19.4: comma instead of period after “Kull”; 108.19.5: am (no capital); 108.19.11: comma after “island”; 108.20.1: no comma after “mainland”; 108.21.7: “the” not in original; 108.34.9: waters; 108.37.8: comma after “below”; 108.38.1: no comma after “surface”; 109.11.8: comma after “itself”; 109.13.1: comma after “forethought”; 109.26.5: “you” capitalized; 109.31.2: period instead of comma after “be”; 109.31.4: comma instead of period after “snarled”; 109.37.12: comma instead of period after “emotion”; 109.39.10: period instead of comma after “carcase”; 111.1.10: comma instead of period after “savage”; 111.10.10: comma instead of period after “dangerously”; 111.14.12: comma before, instead of after, “is”; 111.22.3: comma instead of period after “Tu”; 111.27.4: comma instead of period after “grimly”; 111.30.14: prophesies; 111.39.3: dissappeared; 112.5.2: comma instead of period after “feet”; 112.6.3: decieving; 112.27.4: “to” repeated; 113.2.8: “the” not in original; 113.6.7: prophesies; 113.7.9: Thulses; 113.15.2: period instead of comma after “Kuthulos”; 113.21.9: sentances; 113.25.9: conciousness; 113.29.15: no comma after “Kull”; 113.35.7: no comma after “revealed”; 113.36.2: or; 113.37.8: “that” capitalized; 114.3.7: comma instead of period after “Kuthulos”; 114.20.3: comma instead of period after “hollowly”; 114.39.4: Skull-faced; 115.9.14: Skull-faced; 115.11.9: comma instead of

period after “taunted”; 115.20.7: “you” capitalized; 115.21.1: Skull-faced; 115.24.9: posseses; 115.26.4: period instead of comma after “not”; 115.26.6: comma instead of period after “Kull”; 115.30.5: “Lord” begins new paragraph; 115.33.9: “as” not in original; 115.37.1: period instead of comma after “eagles”; 115.37.3: comma instead of period after “Kull”; 115.38.6: “you” capitalized; 116.1.8: “mine” capitalized; 116.7.9: comma instead of period after “Spear-slayer”; 116.10.10: “still” capitalized.

The Screaming Skull of Silence

Text taken from Howard’s carbon, provided by Glenn Lord. This version is probably incomplete, lacking its last page. The carbon is seven pages, while the original in the Kline files ran eight. Some questionable readings were checked against a transcript prepared by Lord. 119.21.9: “and Ka-nu”; 119.24.7: “all” capitalized; 119.31.5: period instead of comma after “necromancer”; 119.32.7: “no” capitalized; 119.33.3: snake’s; 119.36.9: excercize; 120.5.14: villian; 120.10.1: comma instead of period after “knowledge”; 120.11.8: comma instead of period after “slave”; 120.19.6: “an” not in original; 120.19.16: “the” not in original; 120.27.5: comma instead of period after “now”; 121.5.5: my; 121.15.4: comma instead of period after “impatiently”; 121.21.3: days; 121.23.6: comma instead of period after “Brule”; 121.25.1: regioned; 122.1.8: period instead of comma after “Kuthulos”; 122.1.10: comma instead of period after “said”; 122.18.1: light; 122.20.4: period instead of comma after “Kuthulos”; 122.23.6: period instead of comma after “again”; 122.23.9: “then” capitalized; 123.36.7: senseate; 123.37.10: no comma after “belly”; 123.38.2: no comma after “hands”; 124.9.2: sahdes; 124.14.1: warthfully; 124.18.2: “the” not in typescript; 124.19.10: Kull; 124.20.4: absymal; 124.26.5: horse shoe; 124.35.8: attonement; 124.36.8: againt; 124.37.2: ceaslessly; 125.5.6: abscence; 125.8.8: a half-erased compound word beginning with “tiger-” (second word erased) appears at this point in the typescript; 125.32.4: no comma after “roaring.”

The Striking of the Gong

Text taken from Howard’s untitled carbon, provided by Glenn Lord. The title

comes from Kline's listing (a 1929 Howard letter gives it as "The Chiming of the Gong"). The carbon runs five pages, while Kline's listing indicates the original ran only four. Some questionable readings were checked against a transcript prepared by Lord. 129.2.6: no comma after "reality"; 129.13.7: comma instead of period after "murmured"; 129.19.2: "as" repeated; 129.20.5: period instead of comma after "everything"; 129.20.7: comma instead of period after "mused"; 129.28.6: "but" capitalized; 129.29.4: comma after "recognized"; 129.30.4: no comma after "eyes"; 130.7.10: period instead of comma after "him"; 130.8.2: comma instead of period after "cryptically"; 130.9.10: period instead of comma after "chamber"; 130.10.2: "and" capitalized; 130.19.7: period instead of comma after "dead"; 130.19.11: comma instead of period after "figure"; 130.24.2: "are" not in original; 130.25.1: period instead of comma after "universes"; 130.25.2: "said" capitalized; 130.25.4: comma instead of period after "ancient"; 130.33.7: period instead of comma after "actualities"; 130.34.2: comma instead of period after "tranquilly"; 131.12.2: "the" not in original; 131.15.1: no opening quote before "The"; 131.16.5: period instead of comma after "god"; 131.16.10: comma instead of period after "impatiently"; 131.16.11: "Look" preceded by an en-dash; 131.17.3: "to" not in typescript; 131.26.6: star; 131.38.4: no question mark after "this"; 131.38.6: no question mark after "happened"; 131.39.12: period instead of comma after "realms"; 131.40.12: comma instead of period after "sword"; 132.7.5: "that" capitalized; 132.13.6: skurried; 132.15.4: period instead of comma after "right"; 132.18.4: not; 132.20.5: no quotation mark after "gong."

The Altar and the Scorpion

Text taken from Howard's untitled carbon, provided by Glenn Lord. The title comes from the Kline listing. The carbon runs four pages, while Kline's listing indicates the original ran five. Some questionable readings were checked against a transcript prepared by Lord. 135.1.1: no opening quote before "God"; 135.12.1: "invokation" followed by a comma instead of a period; 135.23.7: "the" capitalized; 135.26.14: comma after "I"; 135.30.1: "the" capitalized; 135.38.7: invokation; 136.10.4: "pent house"; 136.22.4: comma instead of period after "him"; 136.23.9: "the" capitalized; 136.26.4: comma instead of period after "jeered"; 136.35.2: comma after "metallic"; 137.7.5: swordsman; 137.21.3: reverance; 137.35.6: no comma after "frozen"; 137.38.10: no hyphen in "claw like"; 137.39.13: "to" not in original; 138.4.5:

screames; 138.8.9: comma instead of period after “tremulous; 138.14.2: comma instead of period after “girl.”

The Curse of the Golden Skull
Text taken from Howard’s untitled carbon, provided by Glenn Lord. The title comes from the Kline listing. The carbon runs four pages, while Kline’s listing indicates the original ran five. Some questionable readings were checked against a transcript prepared by Lord. 141.7.12: which; 141.13.1: Accolyte; 143.14.11: invokation; 143.18.8: trandscending; 143.25.11: highst; 144.35.7: “to” repeated.

The Black City (Unfinished Fragment)
Text taken from Howard’s typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. 147.9.7: comma instead of period after “fury”; 147.14.4: moutain; 147.15.8: no comma after “tier”; 147.17.13: the; 147.18.10: comma instead of period after “fist”; 147.23.8: comma instead of period after “Pict”; 147.25.4: comma after “stench”; 147.33.5: comma instead of period after “Brule”; 148.4.5: proceded; 148.6.4: keeness; 148.28.11: comma instead of period after “Brule”; 148.31.10: comma after “truth”; 148.35.7: sentious; 148.39.3: comma instead of period after “Brule.”

Untitled Fragment
Text taken from Howard’s typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. 153.8.1: comma instead of period after “figures”; 153.19.12: comma instead of period after “man”; 153.23.8: cimson; 154.1.10: equallity; 154.7.7: remeniscense; 154.7.8: It; 154.11.5: horrizontal; 154.11.6: mark; 154.14.6: vitallity; 154.14.8: straight forwardness; 154.17.10: reserved; 154.20.2: no comma after “Kull”; 154.20.8: We; 154.23.9: interefere; 154.23.10: were; 154.29.2: enroaches; 154.35.9: tribes.

By This Axe I Rule!

Text taken from Howard's draft, provided by Glenn Lord. The draft runs twenty pages (against twenty-three for the–lost–definitive version), with several penciled-in annotations and corrections in Howard's hand. Howard didn't always cross out or erase the words or phrases to be replaced; these are mentioned only in case of doubt. 157.2.7: no comma after "dark"; 157.11.9: "the" capitalized; 157.15.1: comma instead of period after "man"; 157.18.1: comma instead of period after "imperturbably"; 157.21.4: exclamation instead of question mark after "swear"; 157.22.11: comma instead of period after "eyes"; 157.25.9: comma instead of period after "Ascalante"; 157.28.4: comma instead of period after "dagger"; 158.2.1: covenented; 158.3.11: no period after "minstrel"; 158.5.6: "the" capitalized; 158.12.5: unbroken; 158.22.4: Kananu; 158.25.3: body guard; 158.27.1: comma instead of period after "satisfaction"; 158.36.7: comma after "through"; 158.39.12: no period after "of"; 159.6.12: "what" capitalized; 159.12.7: he; 159.12.10: comma instead of period after "Kaanuub"; 159.17.1: inchoerencies; 159.19.11: shoulder; 159.23.2: every; 159.23.4: "the" capitalized; 159.25.8: comma after "skalking"; 159.30.7: no comma after "I"; 159.31.2: down fall; 159.35.11: comma instead of period after "outlaw"; 160.2.12: hare brained; 160.5.15: no comma after "men"; 160.6.3: no period after "me"; 160.9.2: it is unclear whether the phrase "the old dynasty" was to be deleted or not; it seems partly erased on the typescript; 160.10.8: king's; 160.13.2: regeme; 160.15.14: "to" not in original; 160.22.2: "The Lament for the King" between double, not single, quotes; 160.22.4: For; 160.22.13: villian; 160.23.2: villifies; 160.23.5: "that black hearted savage" between double, not single, quotes; 160.29.8: no comma after "knight"; 161.15.6: Moreoever; 161.18.5: "this" capitalized; 161.18.8: states-craft; 161.20.8: comma instead of period after "Brule"; 161.22.13: comma instead of period after "enviously"; 162.18.13: "the" capitalized; 162.23.2: dash after "barbarian"; 162.23.3: parenthesis before "when"; "when" not capitalized; 162.24.13: parenthesis after "me."; 162.25.13: inscense; 162.30.4: comma instead of period after "notch"; 162.37.1: no comma after "forgotten"; 164.9.4: repbrobate; 164.11.5: "to" not in original; 164.16.4: comma instead of period after "sincerity"; 164.18.1: mean; 164.34.5: "there's" capitalized; 164.35.8: no comma after "name"; 165.4.7: altar; 165.14.1: comma instead of period after "him"; 165.17.1: "not" not in original; 165.28.9: "Neither" not in original; 165.28.10: "you" capitalized; 165.29.1: altar; 165.30.6: weakning; 165.33.1: enmies; 165.34.9:

admanant; 165.37.10: comma instead of period after “hand”; 166.8.9: betwen; 166.22.1: escpecially; 166.29.2: comma instead of period after “sir”; 166.29.3: she; 166.29.8: comma instead of period after “surprize”; 166.34.4: summonsed; 169.1.10: comma after “her”; 169.4.7: “the” capitalized; 169.16.7: comma instead of period after “heavily”; 169.19.4: comma instead of period after “wrath”; 169.23.1: Dont; 169.24.4: comma instead of period after “shoulder”; 169.27.4: semi-colon instead of period after “smiled”; 169.29.7: no comma after “asked”; 169.32.10: “and” capitalized; 169.34.3: comma instead of period after “laughed”; 169.36.4: inch’s; 170.4.1: comma after “born”; 170.23.4: comma instead of period after “man”; 170.26.1: holliday; 170.35.1: Dont; 170.35.3: comma instead of period after “afraid”; 170.39.1: comma instead of period after “foot”; 171.1.3: comma instead of period after “weakly”; 171.9.5: wrestly; 171.18.7: nitches; 172.4.11: uncertainly; 172.10.3: comma instead of period after “Ascalante”; 172.11.1: no comma after “Haste”; 172.13.4: no period after “Ridondo”; 172.16.3: comma instead of period after “Ascalante”; 172.21.3: comma instead of period after “Ridondo”; 172.26.1: comma after “Kull”; 172.33.14: hurlted; 172.35.5: tableaux; 172.37.2: “terrible eyed” (no hyphen); 172.39.3: semicolon instead of colon after “shouted”; 172.39.12: fourteen; 173.1.7: thime; 173.11.4: piece; 173.20.3: no comma after “speed”; 173.27.3: “back hand” (no hyphen); 173.32.17 (or 33.1): “with” not in ts; 173.34.3: one; 173.34.6: no period after “them”; 173.35.7: semicolon instead of comma after “savagely”; 173.38.8: “back his vizor” is typed here, with “off his slouch hat” handwritten above; 173.39.6: comma instead of period after “glaring”; 173.40.2: exclamation instead of question mark after “live”; 174.1.5: no semicolon after “viciously”; 174.2.8: no comma after “and”; 174.21.7: comma instead of period after “breathlessly”; 174.26.5: comma instead of period after “sharply”; 174.40.3: exclamation instead of question mark after “first”; 177.3.6: “him” not in typescript; 177.5.12: for; 177.8.4: villian; 177.23.6: the typescript reads “particularly including honor”; it is unclear which word was to be deleted; 177.24.2: comma instead of period after “murmured”; 177.25.4: what ever; 178.5.6: a sentence was to be added at this point, but the pencil is now too faded on the typescript to decipher; 178.7.4: unifrom; 178.10.6: comma instead of period after “huskily”; 178.11.4: t’will; 178.11.8: ’Tis; 178.36.1: the phrase: “in the evening only did Ala find a chance” appears above the text, in pencil; clearly Howard was to rewrite this passage and several others on the last pages of the draft; 179.5.4: no comma after “his”; 179.6.1: the words “he was himself” appears above the text, in pencil; 179.14.7: others; 180.2.12: wand like; 180.3.13: comma instead of period after “him”; 180.5.3: comma instead of period after “blood”; 180.9.3:

comma instead of period after “blazing”; 180.9.9: knigship; 180.12.4: an unreadable sentence beginning with “While he…” is written on the typescript at this point but is too faint to be deciphered; 180.16.4: hve; 180.18.7: fightened.

Swords of the Purple Kingdom

Text taken from Howard’s draft, provided by Glenn Lord. The draft runs twenty-seven pages (against thirty-one for the–lost–definitive version), with several penciled-in annotations and corrections in Howard’s hand. Howard didn’t always cross out or erase the words or phrases to be replaced; these are mentioned only in case of doubt. Some questionable readings were checked against a transcript prepared by Lord. 183.13.2: no comma after “companion”; 183.13.6: powerfully; 183.19.10: no period after “Atlantean”; 183.29.10: no comma after “foreigners”; 183.31.10: looks; 183.32.5: no quotation mark after “race”; 183.35.4: familes; 184.4.12: no comma after “armies”; 184.13.10: ruthlesness; 184.16.9: “Well” capitalized; 184.25.10: in; 184.33.7: comma instead of period after “Brule”; 184.33.13: opening quote before “To”; 184.40.2: lovliness; 185.1.10: brood; 185.4.12: sword hardened (no hyphen); 185.14.14: comma instead of period after “toy”; 185.17.9: comma instead of period after “patience”; 185.22.4: “and” capitalized; 186.4.1: embarrassment; 187.3.3: Formallity; 187.4.4: no comma after “Brule”; 187.5.1: formallity; 187.9.4: the; 187.27.5: formallity; 187.28.12: he; 187.35.8: comma instead of period after “action”; 188.6.7: Borna’s; 188.7.1: over threw; 188.13.4: comma instead of period after “Kull”; 188.33.4: sparce; 189.3.3: comma after “Dondal”; 189.7.10: comma instead of period after “Tu”; 189.24.5: no comma after “long”; 189.24.6: no comma after “slim”; 189.25.11: comma after “rose”; 189.29.6: Acursed; 189.33.13: ecstacy; 189.34.7: rendevous; 190.22.1: comparitively; 190.29.5: sparce; 190.39.8: parrallel; 191.2.7: flag stones; 191.3.4: its; 191.4.5: comma instead of period after “Farsunian”; 191.11.6: comma instead of period after “Pict”; 191.11.7: Cant; 191.13.6: accidently; 191.16.1: terachery; 191.20.6: cut throat; 191.20.8: comma instead of period after “Dalgar”; 191.22.2: period instead of question mark after “beggar”; 191.32.3: conciousness; 191.37.2: dont; 191.37.8: comma instead of period after “dazed”; 192.27.5: Slayer; 192.36.5: comma instead of period after “Kananu”; 192.40.10: “to him” after “king” (193.1.4) in original; 193.7.2: no comma after “mates”; 193.8.1: reminisces; 193.13.5: procedings; 193.20.1: comma after “least”; 193.26.8: semicolon

instead of comma after “palace”; 194.1.7: comma instead of period after “king”; 194.14.3: honey combed; 194.22.6: em-dash after “but”; 194.30.4: comma instead of period after “said”; 194.38.3: proceded; 195.2.8: comma instead of period after “king”; 195.9.3: back; 195.23.1: alllowed; 195.27.3: “the” capitalized; 195.30.10: dissappearance; 196.2.9: minature; 196.3.9: over ran; 197.1.5: comma instead of period after “Verulian”; 197.2.2: havent; 197.3.1: no period after “tongue”; 197.5.10: comma instead of period after “companion”; 197.6.2: wont; 197.10.12: comma after “Dalgar”; 197.17.1: Hadnt; 197.17.6: quiered; 197.19.4: cant; 197.20.1: cant; 197.34.6: comma after “relief”; 197.35.10: her; 198.6.3: comma instead of period after “giant”; 198.22.4: en-dash after, instead of before, the quote; 198.23.1: comma instead of en-dash after “cloth”; 198.23.2: “and” capitalized; 198.29.1: comma instead of period after “swiftly”; 198.30.4: he; 198.30.9: reward; 198.31.7: a; 198.34.2: comma instead of period after blazing; 198.35.13: “how” capitalized; 198.37.10: comma instead of period after “breathlessly”; 199.7.12: comma instead of period after “obeyed”; 199.9.12: comma instead of period after “voice”; 199.11.1: “the” capitalized; 199.12.5: comma instead of period after “Verulian”; 199.14.2: it; 199.14.11: cloesly; 199.23.8: comma instead of period after “Gonda”; 199.34.2: no comma after “Kull”; 199.35.1: rion; 200.1.9: effected; 200.7.10: litteraly; 200.14.2: tiger like; 200.15.11: alos; 200.20.4: colon instead of period after “girl”; 200.21.1: like wise; 200.22.8: reasuringly; 200.30.6: soldier; 200.40.10: black smith; 201.1.5: seem; 201.4.1: hair; 201.15.1: no quotation marks before and after “Well”; 201.15.4: no quotation mark before “here”; 201.15.12: no quotation mark after “too”; 201.17.1: leader ship; 201.17.6: no period after “Valusian”; 201.18.14: unconcious; 201.30.14: hin; 202.4.1: hammer like; 202.9.2: Verulian; 202.11.5: comma instead of period after “one”; 202.13.10: comma instead of period after “shriek”; 202.13.11: Dont; 202.22.6: “must” repeated after “necessarily”; 205.14.3: mw; 205.22.7: grat; 206.2.13: foot steps; 206.5.10: asounted; 206.6.11: no comma after “naked”; 207.1.11: helment; 207.1.11: comma after “helmet”; 207.3.8: comma after “man”; 207.3.13: comma after “same”; 207.15.2: no comma after “cruel”; 207.15.4: imbeded; 208.30.5: comma instead of period after “Kull”; 208.33.3: comma instead of period after “ejaculated”; 208.33.7: comma after “Tu”; 208.40.13: comma instead of period after “moodily”; 209.14.1: comma instead of period after “blood”; 209.20.9: resplendant; 209.33.13: comma instead of period after “him”; 209.36.5: comma instead of period after “head”; 210.4.2: comma instead of period after “arm”; 210.7.2: “have” not in original; 210.16.10: another.

The King and the Oak
Text taken from Howard's typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

Kings of the Night
Text taken from Weird Tales, November 1930. 217.1.2: Cæsar; 217.37.12: Cæsar; 221.18.3: Cæsar; 221.22.5: Cæsar; 222.10.13: Cæsar; 222.36.5: stedfast; 227.18.13: "will-power" hyphenated at line break; 239.38.9–10: way possible; 241.10.3: "side-long" hyphenated at line break; 244.8.1: comma after "guard."

Summer Morn
Howard's original is no longer extant. It was, however, among the poems microfilmed by Robert Barlow. Text taken from Glenn Lord's transcription of the microfilm.

Am-ra the Ta-an
Text taken from Howard's typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

The Tale of Am-ra
Text taken from Howard's typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

Untitled and Unfinished Fragment
Howard's original was not located in time for this edition. Text taken from Glenn Lord's typed copy of Howard's original.

Untitled and Incomplete Fragment
Text taken from Howard's typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. Only pages 10 and 11 of this fragment have come to us. No changes have been made for this edition.
The Shadow Kingdom (Draft)
Text taken from Howard's typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

Delcardes' Cat
Text taken from Howard's typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

The King and the Oak (Draft)
Text taken from Howard's typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.
This wouldn't have been posssible except for the support of my family. Julie, Levi, Ethan and Ellie, thanks for putting up with the long hours and struggle that went into making this. My parents, Mike and Robyn, and mother-in-law "Mrs. P" for helping out whenever I needed it. My grandfather for the place to work and the companionship. JD and Vance, entertaining me as always. Marcelo, I'm just lucky I wasn't close by or I'm sure you'd have my head. Thanks for the chance to do this.

Justin Sweet

I would like to thank the usual suspects, Marcelo, Stuart, Rusty, Steve and Jim for their outstanding efforts; this one didn't come easy. Special thanks to Glenn Lord for his continued support and to Jack and Barbara Baum for their support and dedication. Also to Joe Marek for his help and suggestions. And all my love to Sheila who had to patiently endure my extended forays into Valusian territories as it slowly dawned on me that Time and Space aren't as relative in this world as they are in Valusia….

Patrice Louinet

Many thanks to Marcelo, for sharing with me the vision of the REH Library of Classics and allowing me aboard; to Jack and Barbara Baum, for sharing and promoting that vision and for many kindnesses to me and Shelly; to the entire Wandering Star gang but in particular this time to Stuart and Patrice (as well as Marcelo) for all their hard work under a tight deadline; to Steve Tompkins for his enthusiasm and a fine introductory essay; to Glenn Lord, Robert E. Howard's greatest champion; and of course to Shelly, mi corazon, for her love, encouragement, and support. *Ka nama kaa lajerama!*

Rusty Burke

Thanks once again to Marcelo, Patrice and Rusty for making things easier with each passing book. Thanks also to Mandy and Emma for being patient with me, Fishburn Hedges for allowing me to use their design studio after hours and at weekends again for the last time–I'm buying a laptop for the next one–and, finally, to Chris Crump, Howard fan and illustrator of *The Secret Valley,* with whom I've exchanged Howard books and fanzines for many years. *All the best with the sequel, Chris!*

Stuart Williams

I’d like to thank everyone who has been involved and helped with this Robert E. Howard library of classics especially Stuart, Patrice and Rusty, without whom it may not have happened. And to Graziana, for your patience, love, and support. Thank you.

Marcelo Anciano

THE FULLY ILLUSTRATED ROBERT E. HOWARD LIBRARY
from Del Rey Books

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The Bloody Crown of Conan

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The Conquering Sword of Conan

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"I adore these books. Howard had a gritty, vibrant style—broadsword writing that cut its way to the heart, with heroes who are truly larger than life. I heartily recommend them to anyone who loves fantasy."

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“Howard honestly believed the basic truth of the stories he was telling. It’s as if he’d said, ‘This is how life really was lived in those former savage times!’”

—DAVID DRAKE,
author of *Grimmer Than Hell* and *Dogs of War*

“For headlong, nonstop adventure and for vivid, even florid, scenery, no one even comes close to Howard.”

—HARRY TURTLEDOVE

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Am-ra the Ta-an

The Tale of Am-ra
Untitled and Unfinished Fragment
Untitled and Incomplete Fragment
The Shadow Kingdom (Draft)
Delcardes' Cat
The King and the Oak (Draft)
Appendices
Atlantean Genesis
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